

IN A DARK CHRYSALIS

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Preface

The idea for *In A Dark Chrysalis* began germinating a couple years ago while I was drafting short stories centered on child protagonists. Before returning to UH-Mānoa, I taught preschool and elementary school students, and had been preoccupied with their individual challenges, needs, and desires, and how best to help them learn and grow. Often, it seemed to me that preschool children did not yet have the words to express the depth and complexity of their thoughts and emotions, while a nine or ten year old child could *choose* not to express a feeling. Nurturing children's growth reminded me of what an interesting and challenging time childhood is. For children, discoveries abound; magic seems possible. It seemed to me that the children saw and perceived much, perhaps sometimes more than we adults thought they did; yet, their interpretations of what they saw were limited by their experiences. When I returned to UH, I found that I most wanted to write about childhood, about what I had learned and been reminded of during my experiences teaching kids. *In A Dark Chrysalis* is a collection of linked tales and prose poems that center around child protagonists and loss, and how we deal with loss and change in order to grow.

I chose to leave the first few tales I wrote out of this collection because while they worked thematically, I wanted the collection to be tight and as cohesive as possible, with no more than a handful of characters that are easy to keep track of. There are two tale strands in *In A Dark Chrysalis*, both set in Hawai'i. The first starts with "The Dark Corners" and features a preschool-aged child named Susanna who encounters what it means to die for the first time with the deaths of her great-grandmother and a friend who is her age. This story strand continues in "Susanna Stories," featuring Susanna at about age nine or ten, and her younger sister, Elise, age

five. In this story, Susanna struggles with how to simultaneously comprehend death and live without making death's inevitability a constant shadow. The second story strand begins with "Mango Story" and features a brother and sister, Tiare, age ten, and Ian, age eight, who face the death of their mother, Pearl, and a loss of domestic stability when they go to live with their Auntie Rae. This story strand continues with prose poems in "Memba when," which follows Rae back to her pre-adolescent and teenage years as she struggles with the death of her younger brother and a miscarriage, and the social pressures as a teenager in relation to her sexuality. Next in this sequence is "Rememba," a blend of prose, prose poetry, and poetry. It moves forward to the present, after Rae's re-experience of her teenage past. "Rememba" focuses on the relationship between Rae and her sister, Pearl, in the aftermath of Rae's lack of care for Pearl's children. Both story strands intertwine in the last two tales, "Sun, Rain, Banyan" and "Feels like butterflies," which are told from the point of view of Tiare's daughter, Veronica, whose sixth-grade teacher is Susanna.

I have been afraid of loss since I can remember. I first encountered death while in preschool, and used elements of that experience in the tale "The Dark Corners." Just as in Susanna's story, my great-grandmother died (though she did not live with us as Susanna's Grandma Bella does), and my mom explained to me that death is something that happens when you are very old. But not too long after that, a boy who lived across the street from me, whom I played with and went to preschool with, died suddenly. I don't remember him or my great-grandmother. My "memories" of her exist in the details my mom has described to me of what our relationship was like, and in memory images I think I may have made up. I've worked this second loss – losing a person to memory – into "Susanna Stories."

Even though I don't remember losing my great-grandma or my classmate, I remember being worried about losing my mom and dad. Like Rae in "Memba When," I am not religious, though sometimes I wish I were – would it make loss easier? When my grandfather died about four years ago, one of the things that bothered me was that I did not know where he was. I was in the hospital room with him when he died: He *was* there. He had been there. It hurt my heart so much that I could not place him in any sense.

In the two pieces about Rae's development, "Memba When" and "Rememba," I focus on how loss can change us. I first wrote Rae in "Mango Story" as an adult mother to a toddler and aunt to Tiare and Ian. That tale is told through Tiare's eyes, and I wrote Rae as a kind of evil stepmother character – she is unkind, cruel, and abusive. Because the story is focalized through Tiare's experience, there is no definite reason for Rae's cruelty, just a hint at previous tension between her and her sister, Pearl, who is Tiare's mother. However, I knew there must be more to Rae: not just an angry person, but someone whose development was hurt, blighted. "Memba When" takes a step back into Rae's past as a pre-teen and teenager, to her memories of experiences that left bruises and bleeding that never completely healed.

I took some of Rae's experiences from life. When I was a kid, my friend's older sister got pregnant at fourteen. I was scared of her; we could sometimes hear her screaming-swearing through the house walls and fence that separated her from us. I remember seeing her through the screen door and dark haze of the inside of their house, the sunlight where I stood outside painting a stark contrast against the shade within. She had a miscarriage. I understood what a miscarriage was, and why it was sad, but also felt guilty for thinking that her loss might be fortunate, too, because she was so young. Then she got pregnant again. My friend said she

would never make choices like her sister made. In high school, I knew of two students who became pregnant – one was in a creative writing class with me, and the other I knew only by sight. Though I kept my questions and judgment of these young (very young) women to myself, I still judged. I evaluated their appearances and demeanors (*Were they slutty? What does slutty mean, and do only the slutty girls have sex?*), and compared them to my mother who told me she'd first had sex at sixteen (*Did that make my mom a bad teenager? Slutty? But my mom used contraceptives: she didn't get pregnant. She was safe. So maybe she was just more ready than these other girls. Which would make her not a slut, just mature. Right?*). I see now how young they were, but did not fully appreciate that then. The prose poems in “Memba When” sift through a teenage girl's memories, and explore some of the forces that can shape the lives of young women. How we deal with loss, change, our own sexual development, social pressures, and judgment can impact how we grow and who we become, and the effects of these forces seem especially heightened during pre-adolescence and adolescence.

Another very difficult event in Rae's life is drawn from when I worked at the Hawai'i state legislature. One of my tasks was drafting letters and certificates, including certificates that honored the families of organ donors. A family's story of loss stuck with me – a little boy whose parents donated his organs after he died at the beach. He dove into a sand cliff and suffocated. What pulled me about this family's story besides their little boy being so young is that he died in the ecstasy of play, at a family outing. How does sudden death like his and like that of the little boy I had known affect a family, forever alter their shared wholeness?

Many people face the losses and pressures that Rae deals with, and what I wanted most for Rae in “Memba When” and “Rememba” is to show the potential for her to grow full and

green in spite of and because of her experiences. In exploring the themes of development and loss in Rae's prose poems, I ask: how do we contend with, wade, and swim through life that gives us vibrancy and leaves us bereft?

"Mango Story" began with mangoes (*surprise!*) and "Hansel and Gretel." I grew up with a mango tree in our backyard, and confess the sins of lust, greed, gluttony, and most recently envy (I no longer have backyard access) over mangoes. There is a park a few miles from where I live that is home to at least a half-dozen very tall mango trees. I found myself in that park alone as it was getting dark, searching for mangoes and being bitten by mosquitoes and telling myself to hele on, being a woman alone in a public park at night, but then that voice kept interrupting ...*just one more...* and I thought *This could be a story* – characters whose downfall is a lust for mangoes, "Hansel and Gretel" style. While I enjoyed that story premise, its thread was too thin. I kept a little girl and boy as protagonists and organized the story around mangoes. I was surprised when loss worked its way into the story's plot, but it fit.

Linked Collection

I decided to structure the tales as a linked collection after reading Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*. While the stories in *Olive Kitteridge* can stand on their own, together they form points in a chronological unfolding of Olive's life just past middle age and into older age, and reveal stories about the people whose lives have touched her in some way in her home town of Crosby, Maine. I liked that the stories were focused around one character because with each story, I understood and cared about her more. In spite of Olive's occasional roughness, I came to see her as someone enduringly tough and sensitive, wonder about her choices, and hope for her

happiness. I usually experience this kind of empathy when reading novels, but much less often with short story collections. Novels have more room than short stories to unfold characters, providing the reader with more opportunity to come to know and care about them. Strout achieved this empathetic effect in her linked collection, and I am working to create something similar in *In A Dark Chrysalis* by chronologically following two sets of characters. I don't think I've accomplished this as fully as I would like, however, and I plan to add more tales to my collection to create a larger narrative that feels more complete and adds to the dimensions of the characters. I may want to add another story that features Tiare and Ian, and another with Susanna and her sister, Elise – both stories set when the characters are no older than pre-adolescents or adolescents. I am also considering fast-forwarding into old age for either Susanna or Tiare.

Some of the stories in *Olive Kitteridge* feature Olive in the peripheries of a narrative focused on another person who lives in Crosby, such as the story “The Piano Player” (48-60) about Angela O'Meara, who plays piano each evening in a cocktail lounge. Here, we see Olive and her husband, Henry, as patrons of the Warehouse Bar and Grill where Angela plays, and we learn more about them and their relationship through the third-person limited and free indirect style focused on Angela, as she observes them enter the restaurant. What is so effective about *Olive Kitteridge* is that even though some chapters focus on characters other than Olive, the multiplicity of characters does not become confusing because she is used as a pivoting or grounding point. I found something of the opposite in Helen Oyeyemi's linked collection *What is Not Yours Is Not Yours*.

In *What is Not Yours Is Not Yours*, many of the stories feature social and familial webs, connecting characters by featuring the friend or family member of a main character in one story as the focus of another. This adds cohesion to a collection already linked through the recurrence of keys and locks as unifying elements; however, while interesting to read, these relational webs did not seem to play a major role in the movement of the stories as a collection, and the stories that were not part of this network felt strangely clipped from the collection as a whole. I struggled to remember how characters were connected. I enjoyed *What is Not Yours is Not Yours*, but determined to limit the number of characters in my collection of tales because I did not want readers to struggle to keep track of who is connected with whom.

In contrast to *What is Not Yours is Not Yours*, Justin Cronin's linked collection *Mary and O'Neil* focuses on a small group of characters and their development over time. Except for the first story, a novella on Kay and O'Neil's parents, the stories shift focus between Kay, O'Neil, and Mary. However, the collection as a whole gives more attention to O'Neil than the other characters. The first story provides context and back story for O'Neil's life in its focus on his parents, while we do not get as much information about Mary. I did not have an issue with Cronin's choice to center on O'Neil more than Mary, but would have liked to know Mary better, and wondered about character balance in my own stories. I was concerned that readers would come to know Susanna more than the other characters. I want readers to feel that they know each of the characters, and I think there is still more I need to give of Tiare and Susanna so that the reader feels satisfied in understanding them as people.

Though the stories in *Mary and O'Neil* link to form a longer narrative, each story could stand on its own. Cronin occasionally provides a little explanation within individual stories to

fill in pieces of information a reader might need to know should the story be read out of context of the collection. I did not mind this, but when it happened, it struck me as odd. If any of the stories were anthologized, a reader would need that bit of information; however, it distracted me ever so slightly from the story when it occurred – it took me out of the narrative and reminded me that I was reading a story. I am not certain my pieces “Memba When” and “Rememba” would be able to stand on their own as I’ve written them. “Rememba” could be confusing without the pieces that precede it, and the shape poem that begins “Memba When” connects it to “Mango Story,” but does not make sense out of context. “Memba When” could stand on its own if it began with “Babies get one smell...” and I could try to frame and add details to “Rememba” so that it could be read independently of the other pieces; however, I’ve decided that reader immersion and flow from one piece to another are more important to me than ensuring each piece stand on its own. What I enjoyed so much in *Mary and O’Neil* and *Olive Kitteridge* is that the context of the surrounding stories made each story richer. It’s this richness via added context that has been one of my goals.

Rolling the Rs by R. Zamora Linmark is another collection of stories and poems that features recurring characters who we come to know in deeper and more layered ways as we read. However, in contrast to *Olive Kitteridge* and *Mary and O’Neil*, *Rolling the Rs* is not ordered chronologically nor does it advance very far in time. Yet, we come to care about the children Edgar, Florante, Vincente, and Katrina. Because my tales are focused primarily on childhood, I found *Rolling the Rs* a wonderful example of how a linked collection can delve deep into the characters it portrays without taking great strides through time, and as I continue to add to and revise my collection, I know *Rolling the Rs* will influence my choices. Thinking about

Linmark's collection alongside Strout's and Cronin's, I am reminded that there are many possibilities for what I can do with my own collection of linked tales.

Point of View – Language

Rolling the Rs also confronts what is rough and uncomfortable in conflicts of the self with society, specifically in relation to sexual identity and coming of age, and encouraged me to move towards the internal and interpersonal quiet violence that can come with such conflict as I wrote the stories about Rae. When I first read *Rolling the Rs* in a graduate course, one class member used the term “vulgar” as a descriptor because several fifth-graders in the book engage in sexual activity, though a reader may not realize their age until chapters in. This disturbed my classmate, as I am sure it was meant to. The book's first line hits hard and doesn't relent: “So what? Like me teach you how for French kiss, make hickey, and M&M too. Dumb ass, not candies. Mutual mastication, hand-to-hand resuscitation. Learned ‘em from *Afterschool Special* with Mr. Campos...” (1). The children in the book are fighting – fighting to stay above the waves of the system of teachers and adults who don't care, and fighting to be themselves. I wanted a similar rawness to the stories about Rae. All the characters in my collection are navigating loss, but I wanted to show all the rough edges in Rae's stories; while there are rough edges in the other stories, I tend to smooth them over a little, but Rae's character begged answers that I felt only rawness could give. While *Rolling the Rs* is not entirely in Pidgin, much of the language, particularly dialogue, is. Linmark's choice to write language as it is spoken by the characters he portrays creates immediacy, authenticity, closeness, rawness.

I first began using Pidgin in “Mango Story.” While I had an idea of how the story might progress, the words would not come. I tried beginning it in third-person, like a fairy tale, but it was stilted and the story would not move forward. It was only when the voice of Tiare entered my head that the story flowed. I felt like I knew Tiare; for me, the language in which a tale is told is as much a part of the tale as plot or character. I briefly wondered if it were okay for me to tell the whole story in her voice, in Pidgin, but then thought of one of my favorite books, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s use of dialect made me decide to try.

I considered my use of Pidgin again while drafting and revising “Memba When” and “Rememba,” both of which are from Rae’s first-person point of view. Rae is older than Tiare, and so I wrote her Pidgin thicker than Tiare’s. While workshopping “Mango Story,” one of my classmates commented that Tiare sounds like she code-switches, which is an impression I had intended. With Rae, I see her as someone who could code-switch, but whose English sans Pidgin would be spoken with a Pidgin accent.

In “Feels like butterflies,” which is from Veronica’s perspective and is set close to present-day, I made the choice to include some Pidgin words, but decided that Veronica most likely would not speak Pidgin as her mother Tiare and great-aunt Rae had. I decided this because fewer children in Hawai‘i today speak and understand Pidgin. For instance, one of my friends performed in the play *Once Upon One Noddah Time* by Lisa Matsumoto at Mānoa Valley Theatre, and noted that many of the younger people in the cast – seniors attending Kamehameha Schools, for instance – had difficulty speaking the Pidgin dialogue. When I saw the play, I overheard a little boy ask an adult who accompanied him what certain Pidgin phrases meant. I decided that since Tiare spoke Pidgin as a youngster, she would most likely use certain

words and phrases at home, but would probably not speak much Pidgin around her children. The same would most likely be true of quite a few of Veronica's classmates – that they might pick up words and phrases and use them, but would most likely not speak heavy Pidgin.

Geography is also an important factor in writing Pidgin dialogue. I grew up in Hale'iwa and attended Kahuku Elementary and High School, so I set both sets of stories at O'ahu's North Shore and Windward Side. When I wrote about Susanna's home, I imagined the little house in Hale'iwa my family first lived in, and when I wrote about Rae kissing Kalani near the gym, I imagined the gym at my high school. I chose this setting because, particularly when it comes to Pidgin, I felt that I wouldn't be able to begin to approximate the Pidgin spoken in other parts of Hawai'i.

I am not a native Pidgin speaker, so I have given serious thought to my choice to use Pidgin. I grew up hearing Pidgin beginning when I was a toddler, from Grandma Thelma who cared for me and other little ones who also called her Grandma Thelma, from other adults, and from classmates and friends, but my parents are from New York and didn't speak it at home. I have been concerned about using Pidgin because its history is not part of my family history, so I lack the connection and context of those whose relatives grew up in plantation communities in Hawai'i. My choice to write in Pidgin did not spring from a political agenda – I decided to write in Pidgin because that is how Tiare's voice entered my head – but I did think about all those little moments in elementary school when teachers gently corrected my classmates for saying things like “twenny-tree,” and about some teachers who spoke with a Pidgin accent themselves. In *Sista Tongue*, Lisa Linn Kanae addresses Pidgin as a language arising from colonization and necessity, as one that is simultaneously ubiquitous and has a fraught existence. Kanae uses

creative nonfiction and historical narrative, connecting the experience of her brother's speech impediment in preschool with attitudes towards Pidgin, highlighting how the use of Pidgin has been stigmatized. I hope readers receive my use of Pidgin as another assertion (in addition to many other works in and about Pidgin) that it is a language that does and should take up space.

Similarly, I've been concerned about writing about Tiare and her family, who are of mixed ancestry that includes Native Hawaiian. Because this collection is set in Hawai'i, it would be incredibly odd for me to exclude people who are indigenous to Hawai'i. Such a choice would be an insensitive move, and wouldn't make sense in a narrative context. Yet I am a settler, and have been grappling with the answers to questions regarding whether it is okay for me to write in Pidgin, and to incorporate Native Hawaiian cultural references into the stories. One particular instance I have been thinking about is in "Rememba" when Rae feels a connection to all around her via her piko – her head, navel, and genitalia, most particularly her genitalia. Rae's development has been stunted, halted, and she has not been a nurturing caregiver to her niece and nephew. I wanted to center the hope for her potential to grow full on her reorganization of how she connects to life, and on her reconnection to her sister and her genealogy of place. In explaining the significance of Mauna Kea, Kumu Hina writes of piko, "The health of all piko ensures that the life of the native person will rest on an axis of spirituality, genealogy and progeny. The absence of one or more piko will prevent an entity from becoming whole or complete." In the mango forest, I focused specifically on what Rae feels in her genitalia because that is the piko that procreates (Kumu Hina), and I wanted to stress how the pain and obstructions Rae has been dealing with have affected her ability to nurture future generations, particularly in this scene where she is communicating with her sister, whose children she was

entrusted to care for. I wanted to indicate that in this reorganization and reconnection, there is hope for Rae. I wanted to honor the way I felt she would reconnect with herself, her family, and her place in the world to find this hope.

I have worked to be responsible in how I have incorporated these references. I do not want to appropriate or misrepresent; I do not want the reader see what I have written as somehow representational of a culture that is not mine. At the same time, I think it would be equally irresponsible to completely ignore any Hawaiian culture or Hawaiian people when these pieces are set in Hawai‘i.

Three pieces in the collection are written with poetry and prose poetry. I first began incorporating poetry in “Mango Story” to delineate the little mango tree’s point of view from Tiare’s, and continued with prose poems “Memba when” and “Rememba” to communicate that Rae has these experiences while inside the large mango tree. I am using the prose poems to try to create a reading experience that is both closed and open – one where the reader becomes lost in the narrative and also engages in piecing it together. Rae is trying to re-member¹ the pieces of her past and come to terms with them, and I want the reading experience to mimic this attempt to create a shape that makes sense of the pieces.

The content in the tales can be somber, particularly in “Memba when.” Sesshu Foster’s *City Terrace Field Manual* and Charles Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen* treat serious, melancholy content, and they reminded me of the need for a little light in the darkness to create contrast and make the reading bearable. I found Foster’s prose poems difficult to continue reading because of

¹ Credit is due to Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* for my thinking regarding the word *remember* as I developed “Memba when” and “Rememba.” My thoughts were influenced by Morrison’s idea of remembering/re-membling as putting pieces of the past together.

the darkness – I didn’t feel I had breathed in enough of “the sunshine in the lemon trees” before he transitioned to “gasoline scent of pesticide” (16). One of my favorite poems in Baudelaire’s collection is “A Hemisphere in Your Hair” (31) because of the oasis it creates and the breathing room it gives, and how those images and that feeling make me more sensitive to the heavier ones. As I revised “Memba When,” I wanted the reader to find the experience both difficult and pleasurable.

Point of View – Child POV

Most of the tales in *In A Dark Chrysalis* include child point-of-view, and Emma Donoghue’s *Room* was particularly helpful while writing and revising, as well as Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*. While writing “The Dark Corners,” I struggled with point-of-view. From the beginning, I wanted Susanna to be the focus of the story, but struggled with how to communicate the complexity of her confusion and fear, particularly because she is four years old. Initially, I tried creating actual monsters in the story as metaphorical manifestations of her fear because I did not think I could communicate this using only Susanna’s point of view in a realistic story. After reading *Room*, I realized there was so much I could do with point of view, and that there are limits to child point of view that are liberating and have the potential to open up a narrative.

Donoghue employs first-person present-tense, focalized through the eyes of Jack, who is five years old. The way she presents each scene is simple, yet there are many places that are poignantly poetic, and the simplicity adds to the poignancy. One of my favorite bits is the end of the story, when Jack and his mother visit Room for the last time. Room does not look as Jack

remembered it. He says goodbye to each part of it – to the Wall, the Floor, the Bed, to Eggssnake.... Jack’s language is simple, but the scene is not (319-321). I think one of the beauties of child point-of-view is that it can communicate great depth of feeling without overworking it.

To me, the voice for “The Dark Corners” sounds like how a mother might talk or tell a story to a child. But I wanted to incorporate first-person point-of-view from Susanna’s perspective into the story. I particularly liked Donoghue’s creation of intimacy with the first-person present-tense, and wanted to have that element in my tale. I chose to use first-person in the scenes where Susanna and her mother are together at night in bed because those spaces of time are shared only by the two of them, and I felt that bringing the reader into those scenes would help to create more intimacy between the reader and Susanna. But I also decided to mix these bits of first-person narration into the story to slightly destabilize the reader. Since so much of a young child’s life is organized around patterns, I tried to emphasize the pattern of Susanna’s days in the story, and use the break in pattern to show how destabilizing the death of Grandma Bella is. Similarly, I wanted to destabilize the reader.

In writing what Susanna says and thinks, I thought about *Room* – about limiting her articulated speech and thoughts and pulling back rather than giving too much. At four years old, the difference between what can be articulated and what is felt can be huge. I tried to communicate this when writing from the third-person point-of-view, for instance, in the scene where Susanna comes to breakfast the morning after her Grandma Bella has died, and stumbles as she climbs into her chair. Susanna cannot articulate the strangeness of this first morning *ever*

(in her memory) that does not include Grandma Bella, a strangeness that is akin to being in another world.

“Mango Story” is written in first-person point-of-view from Tiare’s perspective. Tiare is ten years old, so she is able to express much more than Susanna at four is able to, yet I tried to be cognizant of what and how much Tiare understands. Generally, she is perceptive regarding her younger brother, Ian. But in the scene where Tiare sees the neighbor, Uncle Charlie, in the same bed as her Auntie Rae, I decided to create a gap between what Tiare understands and what Auntie Rae does. Tiare is more confused than sure of what has happened. Rae cares a great deal about what Tiare perceives, but Tiare is more concerned about what Auntie Rae might do than why Uncle Charlie was in Rae’s bed.

What Maisie Knew gives excellent examples of gaps between what a child character perceives, what adult characters understand, and what is actually happening. James creates ambiguity regarding what Maisie comprehends of what she sees and is told, and how she comprehends it. While I read *What Maisie Knew* after making most of the revisions to “The Dark Corners” and “Mango Story,” considering gaps in understanding has played into how I have written and revised the other stories that feature child point-of-view, and will continue to affect my decisions as I write and revise *In A Dark Chrysalis*.

Genre

As I revised “Susanna Stories,” I struggled with how a tale is told and who tells it. I wanted the *story* that Susanna tells again and again about death to take over the telling of the tale, to reflect how Susanna’s fear of loss is taking over how she lives. In James Wood’s *How*

Fiction Works, his discussion of free indirect style helped me to think about how I was revising. He included *What Maisie Knew* as an example: “James’s free indirect style allows us to inhabit at least three different perspectives at once: the official parental and adult judgment on Mrs. Wix; Maisie’s version of the official view; and Maisie’s view of Mrs. Wix. The official view, overheard by Maisie, is filtered through Maisie’s own half-comprehending voice... James must make us feel that Maisie knows a lot but not enough” (15). Wood points out that just one word or two can complicate a reading, causing the reader to question which character a particular reflection or opinion is coming from. In “Categories of Speech in *Persuasion*,” Norman Page examines Jane Austen’s language techniques in *Persuasion*, and writes of her narrative techniques, “...the peculiar advantages of direct and indirect speech are combined to fashion a medium which brings the reader close enough to the character’s consciousness to have a sense of something at times resembling interior monologue, yet at the same time preserves the kind of objectivity, and frequent reminders of authorial presence, which make explicit comment possible” (738). For “Susanna Stories,” I wanted the reader to question who was telling the tale as it progressed – to use layers of narrative that would cause the reader to think about the role of authorial presence in the tale.

Finally, I incorporated several elements of the fairy tale genre into the tales in *In A Dark Chrysalis*. In her chapter “Voices on the Page” in *Once Upon a Time*, Marina Warner writes about the importance of voice in fairy tales: “This is the essential point: fairy tales on the page invoke live voices, telling stories aloud. A memory of a living narrator reverberates in the genre, even when the story is manifestly a highly wrought literary text” (53). Warner emphasizes that in fairy tales, this invocation of live voices creates a link to the past. My stories are not invested

in creating that kind of link, but I wanted readers to perceive a sense of multiple storytelling voices throughout the collection.

The voices exist together the same world, as does wonder. Fairy tales are one-dimensional – magic occurs on the same plane as the realistic (Lüthi 4-10). Children do not go into a closet to emerge into a magical world because the magic is already present around them, in a gingerbread house in the woods or an enchanted apple given by a fairy. Incorporating one-dimensionality was important to me because I wanted the tales to communicate how immediate and close wonder is every day, in the sprouting of a seed, in life. I chose to express wonder through natural elements – mango and banyan trees, light and shadow – to highlight the immediacy of wonder in the world around us.

Loss and wonder exist in the same world. Both unpredictable, and part of a delicate orchestration of life.

The Dark Corners

Today Susanna's Great Grandma Bella will die a little before twelve in the afternoon. She is very old and very tired. She is ninety-three years old. Can you imagine being ninety-three? We will all die some day, when we are very old and very tired. It will be like going to sleep. One day we will wake up feeling much more tired than we usually are. We will be so tired we will want to go right back to sleep. But we will get up, have breakfast, and take a nap right after breakfast because that is how tired we will be. All we will want to do is sleep. We will be tired even when we are sleeping, in our dreams! Can you imagine being that tired? So when we do drift off and not wake up, it will feel good. We will be ready. But that won't happen for a long time, and we will be very, very old.

~ ~ ~

This morning before Susanna goes to preschool, she and her Great Grandma Bella eat breakfast together as they do every morning. They eat toast with strawberry jam and butter, butter Grandma Bella says she can have because she is old and if she wants butter, she can have butter. This always makes Susanna smile. Susanna decides that when she is old, she will have a lollipop with her breakfast, one with gum in it. Susanna is not allowed to have gum because it got stuck in her hair once.

"Granma, can I have jam?"

Grandma Bella scrapes a dollop from the jar, her hands slightly shaking, and spreads it on Susanna's toast. She places the toast on Susanna's plate, its crispy edges making little sounds

against the Corelle glass as Grandma Bella's hand shakes. She smiles at her great-granddaughter. Susanna swings her legs back and forth and eats her toast with butter and strawberry jam as Grandma Bella eats hers.

"Granma, what's that pill for?" Susanna asks, pointing to the tiniest round one among the five on the blue cloth placemat, scattered near each other next to Grandma Bella's orange juice.

"It's for my heart."

"And that one?" Susanna asks, pointing to a longer one that is flat and shaped like an egg.

"That is for my blood."

"And those ones?" Two large yellow pills that are almost see-through.

"Those are vitamins. They are made from fish oil. They are for my brain and also my heart and blood."

"And that one?" Susanna touches the speckled one with the tip of her finger.

"That's a multivitamin. You take one, too. Your Flintstones."

"Oh. Does yours taste like grape?"

"Unfortunately, no. I swallow it. I don't think it would taste good if I chewed it."

Susanna swaps her purple Flintstones vitamin with Grandma Bella's large one. "You have mine. I'll chew the yucky one."

Grandma Bella is about to say something, her eyes smiling, when Susanna's father walks to the table and gives Grandma Bella and Susanna each a kiss as he does every weekday morning before he leaves for work. He sets his black backpack on the floor near the table and holds his yellow tie against his chest with one hand so that it does not dip into their juice and jam as he

bends over first Grandma Bella and then Susanna, a kiss on Grandma Bella's cheek and one on Susanna's forehead. "Have a good day, my lovely ladies," he says, as he says every morning.

Susanna's mother comes to the table with a cup of coffee in one hand and a thermos in the other. She sets the cup on the table and hands the thermos to Susanna's dad as she does nearly every morning. They kiss. Susanna watches them from her seat and smiles over her toast, her mouth sticky from the butter and jam. Grandma Bella watches Susanna and smiles. Grandma Bella sighs a little. She feels especially tired this morning. She is, after all, ninety-three years old.

~ ~ ~

Today your grandma died. She was very old and very tired.

I was taking my nap too.

Dying is like going to sleep, except you do not wake up.

Can I die in my nap?

No. You are four.

Almost five.

You will not die until you are very, very old. As old as Grandma Bella.

Can you imagine?

I cannot count to ninety.

She is not in her body now.

~ ~ ~

At dinner tonight, Susanna eats her spaghetti. She cried an hour ago when her mom held her in her lap and told her Grandma Bella died, but she is eating her spaghetti now. With trees that are broccoli.

The place where Grandma Bella sat at the table does not have Grandma Bella. No one is there, and there is no plate for her. No fork or knife or glass for her water or tiny glass for her wine. Susanna would have asked to smell her wine, as she asked every night. But she cannot ask Grandma Bella tonight. It hasn't yet occurred to her that she won't be able to ask Grandma Bella tomorrow night, either.

~ ~ ~

Mommy gets in bed with me.

I think it's because Grandma Bella died.

She holds me. Touches my fingernails.

Where is Grandma Bella?

I don't know.

She is all around us now. Love stays with us.

Ms. Bajo says when we die we go to heaven. Is she in heaven?

What do you think?

Yes.

I think you're right.

~ ~ ~

When Susanna comes to the table for breakfast this morning, she is surprised not to see Grandma Bella sitting in her seat. Then she remembers that Grandma Bella died. Susanna stands next to the table and stares at the plates and the toast and the butter and the jam and the juice. Grandma Bella is not here to say *Good morning*. She is not here to say *Have some toast, Susanna*. Her smile is not here to tell Susanna to sit down and *join me for breakfast* without actually saying those words, the magical way some smiles do. Susanna stands near the table.

“Good morning, Susanna.” Her mom places a hand on her back and guides her to her seat with the light yellow booster. “Sit down, sweetie.” Her mom waits; ever since Susanna could climb up herself she always liked to. Susanna climbs into her seat slowly, looking at the empty space where Grandma Bella would be sitting. Her foot misses the rail, but her mom catches her under the arms and helps her up. Her mom pushes in the seat and sits next to her.

“It’s weird not having Grandma Bella here, isn’t it?”

Susanna nods.

~ ~ ~

Because it is Saturday, Susanna does not go to preschool and her dad does not go to work. Her mom and her dad talk on the phone a lot. They call people and say, “Grandma Bella died yesterday.”

Susanna can hear them from her room. She sits on the floor with Raggedy Ann, combing the doll's bright red yarn hair with her fingers. Raggedy Ann is the only doll she has; her other toys are stuffed animals and crayons and Legos and a pair of roller skates that attach to her shoes. She does not like dolls, except for Raggedy Ann. Grandma Bella gave her Raggedy Ann. Susanna does not remember this, but she knows her doll is from Grandma Bella because that is what Grandma Bella and her mom told her.

"Grandma Bella died," Susanna says to Raggedy Ann. "She took her nap. She did not wake up." Susanna unties Raggedy Ann's apron and takes it off, smoothing the dress and red hair as she turns her doll over to face her. Susanna holds Raggedy Ann's face up to her ear and listens. She nods. "She is in heaven. And all around us." Susanna lifts Raggedy Ann's blue dress to see more of her poufy underwear and striped legs. She pulls up the underwear's elastic waistband and smooths the dress over it. "I know," she whispers. "I know," she whispers again. Susanna holds Raggedy Ann to her chest and rocks back and forth. "I know. I miss her, too."

~ ~ ~

Because it is Saturday, Susanna plays outside with friends. She has on her roller skates and her yellow helmet with the plastic cat ears and painted kitty face with the pink cat nose and black cat whiskers. Jonah who lives across the street wears his dinosaur helmet and rides his bike. Jonah's mom watches them play from the yard in front of Jonah's house. She has on her

bathing suit and sits in a lawn chair. There are no lines on the street to tell cars where to drive because the neighborhood is so small and only people who live there ever drive there.

Susanna tries to push off the bumpy asphalt with her skates. Whenever she pushes hard, she glides for a little while but then the bumps slow her down to a stop. Jonah rides his bike. He rides around and around, yelling “Hey, Susanna!” He nudges the large plastic beach ball they are passing back and forth with his front tire, trying to get it to go in Susanna’s direction. It goes the other way, and he, Susanna and Hailey, who is using her big brother’s skateboard, try to get it back. Sometimes Hailey leaves the skateboard behind and runs after the ball. Susanna is the furthest behind because of the asphalt bumps. But she doesn’t want to take her roller skates off.

Hailey catches the ball and throws it in front of Jonah, and he bumps it again. They laugh. Susanna laughs too, and tries to skate to it, but Jonah gets there first. He bumps it, and it lands in Susanna’s yard. Hailey gets there first, and throws it back to Jonah. Susanna stops. She skates to the grass on her yard, bump-bump-bump-bump-bump, and sits down. She thinks about taking her skates off. She watches Hailey and Jonah chase and throw and chase the ball, yelling. Then Hailey goes to Jonah’s mom and asks her something Susanna can’t hear.

Jonah bikes onto the grass near Susanna and brakes. “Are you playing?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” He looks at her. A little bit of shiny red shows under his nose. Susanna stands up and looks at his face. She touches just under his nose and they look at the blood on her fingers.

Jonah touches his nose and looks at the blood on his fingers. The blood starts to run in two thin lines from each nostril of his nose down to his mouth.

“I have a nosebleed,” Jonah says. He gets on his bike and rides to his mom. She looks up his nose, then stands and yells across the street to Susanna, one hand on Jonah's shoulder, “Go inside, Susanna! Go inside your house! Jonah will come get you when he can play again!”

Susanna walks across the grass in her skates to her front door. She forgets she has Jonah's blood on her fingers, and when she undoes the Velcro on the skates, it smears a little on the yellow plastic.

~ ~ ~

Mommy's legs are scratchy under the covers. But I snuggle.

Mommy?

Yes?

Will you and daddy die?

Yes.

But we will be very old. You will be old. Grandma Bella was ninety-three. When I am ninety-three, you will be sixty-three.

Can you imagine that?

No.

It is very, very far away.

Mommy touches my hair and my head. In my dream I'm Raggedy Ann. Mommy's combing my hair.

~ ~ ~

We will all die some day, when we are very old and very tired. It will be like going to sleep.

~ ~ ~

Because it is Sunday Susanna's dad makes pancakes. Susanna sits on the counter and watches him pour the batter from the measuring cup onto the griddle in a thin line. The batter is a little bubbly, a little thick, but flows easily. *This is exactly how it should be*, her dad had said, and let Susanna stir so that she could feel the thickness. Now they both watch the three pancakes he poured.

"When it bubbles all around the edges, then you know it's ready to flip," Susanna's dad says. "So watch closely. Let me know when you think it's ready."

Susanna stares at the pancakes so that she won't miss it. One of the pancakes gets a bubble and then another. "Is that one ready?" Susanna asks.

"No. It will be really bubbly."

"More than ten?"

"Yes. More than ten on *each* pancake. The edges of the pancakes will be covered in bubbles."

Susanna waits and watches.

There's another bubble, and then another... five on one pancake. Four on the other. Another... another! It looks like maybe ten. Susanna waits. When it looks like the pancake edges are covered in bubbles, she asks "Now?"

"Yes, now!" her dad responds. With quick movements he slides the spatula under one pancake and flips it over, then the second and the third. The flipping is one of Susanna's favorite parts.

Susanna's mom walks in the kitchen door from the backyard. She is not smiling. She closes it and looks at Susanna's dad and Susanna. She smiles. "Sweetie, are you having fun making pancakes with dad?"

"I told dad when to flip them. I got it right!"

"I'm really looking forward to the pancakes. They will be so tasty."

Susanna's dad looks at her mom. "Are Sandy and Richard okay?"

"Later."

Susanna watches them. Her mom sees her watching. "Susanna... did you hear anything last night?"

"No."

"Okay." She raises her eyebrows at Susanna's dad and shakes her head. "We'll talk later. Those pancakes," she says louder to Susanna, "Smell so yummy!" She lifts Susanna off the counter and spins her once. Susanna giggles.

~ ~ ~

One day we will wake up feeling much more tired than we usually are. Can you imagine being that tired?

~ ~ ~

Susanna holds back her giggles, and keeping her head low so that it won't brush the wooden slats that hold her mattress above her, crawls closer to the wall.

"Susanna?" She hears her mom's voice again.

"Susanna? Where are you?" Susanna sees her mom's feet in the doorway of her room. She watches her mom's feet walk into the room, walk in a small circle around the middle of the room, and walk to the closet. She watches the closet open. "Susanna?" She watches her mom's feet leave the room.

Susanna smiles big and the giggles wheeze out a little between her teeth. She puts a hand over her mouth to stop them.

"Susanna?" she hears from down the hall. "Susanna? This is not funny!" Susanna sees her mom's feet walk quickly past her room back the way they came, towards the living room.

"Susanna!" Her mom's voice is louder now. "Susanna!" The next cry comes out sounding like her mother's voice is scratched: "Susanna! You answer me now!" And the sound of running.

Susanna scrambles out from under her bed. "Mommy! I'm here!"

"Susanna!" Her mom is in the doorway to her room, and Susanna is surprised to see that her mom's face is red and there are tears coming from her eyes and running down her cheeks.

Her mom walks towards her, each step heavy. "Why didn't you answer me?" She takes each of

Susanna's arms in her hands and kneels down so that Susanna is looking directly into her eyes.

"Didn't you hear me call you?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you answer?"

"I don't know."

"I was so worried. I thought... something horrible happened to you."

Susanna wants to hug her mom, but her arms are trapped in her mom's hands. Her heart pounds hard and she feels hot all over. She swallows the salty snot that is the beginning of tears in the back of her throat.

"Don't you ever do that to me again!" her mom says, and brings Susanna against her chest in a hug. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." Susanna is crying now.

Her mom holds Susanna until Susanna finishes crying and until she finishes crying. Then she leads Susanna to the bed. Susanna crawls up and her mom holds her in her lap like when she was a baby, only Susanna's legs reach the mattress.

"You're getting so big!" her mom says.

"I'm sorry, mommy."

"Thank you, Susanna. Just don't do that again." Susanna leans her head against her mom's chest, and feels her mom sigh. "Remember when I told you not to ask Jonah to play, after we had pancakes?"

"Yes."

Her mom takes another big breath and sighs again, so that Susanna's head lifts up and down.

"Well.... You couldn't play with Jonah today... because Jonah died."

Susanna looks at her mom's face. Her mom hugs her closer.

"Jonah died last night. That is why he could not play. Oh, honey." Susanna's mom cups Susanna's head with one hand and holds her against her chest. "It is very, very sad." Susanna listens to her mom's heartbeat. Thu-thum, thu-thump, thu-thump. They sit together on the bed for a long time.

~ ~ ~

Once upon a time there was a little girl. She lived with her mom and her dad and her great grandmother in a little house in a quiet neighborhood with other little children. The little girl liked playing outside on her roller skates. She liked playing outside under an umbrella when it rained. She liked sitting next to her great grandmother at the little kitchen table when they ate breakfast and dinner. She liked asking her great grandmother questions. They talked about cats, which the little girl wanted but her great grandmother explained they could not have because her mom was allergic. They talked about elephants, which they saw at the zoo once. The little girl was so excited to see them, but scared because they were SO big. She climbed up her daddy's leg to his arms when those elephants came out. She did not remember this, but she knew it happened because that is one of the stories her great grandmother told her. She liked that story.

She loved her mom and her dad and her great grandmother very much.

Then one day the little girl came home from preschool and her mommy told her that her great grandmother died. While the little girl was at preschool, her great grandmother died. She took her nap and did not wake up.

The little girl thought about this. She took a nap, too.

But she woke up, of course.

The little girl missed her great grandmother.

Then one day not too long after this, her mommy took her in her lap and told her that her friend died. He was not old. He was as old as she was. This is what happens.

Sometimes people get really sick and they die. He was not sick. Sometimes people get hurt very badly and they die. He did not get hurt. But he had a nosebleed. He did not die from his nosebleed. But he had one.

Nobody said that he was not in his body now.

The little girl cuddled close to her mommy before bed. She listened to her mommy's heartbeat.

~ ~ ~

I hug Mom tight.

I'll stay until you fall asleep.

Stay all night.

I can't.

If she stands up I won't let go.

All you have to do is call.

I'm crying. I snuggle close.

And I'll hear you.

S h h h h h h h,

Go to sleep. It will feel good.

Keep me safe?

I promise. I will always keep you safe.

Mango Story

leaving their sticky slick.

sucking whole portions of me clean away,
eating me,
thick and greedy,
I remember slugs,
light.

and
Dampness, and dryness,
scratch of beetles.
tickle of ants,
Slide of worms,
dry earth.
wet earth,

i start here: I don't remember myself as a (seed) I remember p a r t i n g EARTH in the dark:

I remember parting earth deeper,
tentatively, and
then

F

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E

L Y

~

First time I wen eat mango was at my cousin's birthday. Lani Girl was turning one, and we had one big lū'au on the beach. *I cannot believe you wen neva have mango befoa*, my Auntie Rae said. She look at me and my brother all hard-eyes. Her eyes was always hard when she wen look at us, specially now that she have to look at us all the time. Only time she look soft is at my cousin, her daughter Lani Girl. But Lani Girl is nice, so I not mad at Lani Girl.

So juicy and cold and sweet, that mango. Me and Ian ate some and then some more. We wen run into the water, play, then run back up and eat mango. Was summer and hot. All the adults stay under the tent talking, some go down the beach and swim. Our mom stay on the chair the whole time 'cause she tired, one white scarf wrapped around her head and fluttering from the breeze, the ends sometimes coming across her neck or touching her shoulders. I think she look so beautiful even though she stay tired. But she laugh when we bring her things from the ocean. She laugh biggest when Ian wen bring her one baby crab. He caught um and held um, his fingers pressed like one shell around that baby crab. He so careful not to crush um. He laugh when he caught um, yelled at me *Hey, Tiare!* and I wen run up and he open just a little hole in his hands so I can see the baby crab. I saw some of the baby's pointy sand-colored legs and little bubble eyes that stick up from da head. I knew Ian wen risk losing the crab by showing me, and it felt good that he want me for see um that bad and share with me.

When he brought um to our mom, he whisper to her and then open his palms a little, then a lot. She laugh and he give the baby to her. It got away, ran out from her hands and down her leg. She scream a little, but in one good way. Was one good memory.

Second time get mango was at Auntie Rae's house after mom died. She had um sliced in one bowl on the table, and me and Ian ate some, then some more. Was when we first come live with her. Was still summer and hot. Only her mango was hot, too. She said was fresh, from her neighbor's yard. She told us stop eating um after we went for third pieces. Said we was greedy. "Why you not sad, your mom dead?" she wen ask. Ian wen look down, I remember. His eyes was full of tears.

Third time get mango we take um from the neighbor's yard. Had so many on the ground, so many rotting the smell was so strong, like super sweet yucky vinegar wine breath, only smell good 'cause you know was mango. Had so many, I say we take one. Ian look at me like I said for steal. Was stealing, but get so many the neighbor let rot I think was okay for take just one. "It going rot, too," I wen tell Ian. "Just one, we share." I can tell he no like, felt shame for do something like that. So I did it. I wen wriggle my body through the ginger the neighbor grows around his yard, and go find one mango stay yellow and orange and red but not rotting or split. I find one small one, but I like one bigger one. I see Ian looking at me through the bushes. I hold the small one in one hand, searching for one better. So many rotten mangoes. When I find one bigger one, I drop the small one 'cause I said just one, and two would be greedy. I look at the neighbor's windows, around the side of the house for see if he coming, but no one. Stay summer still yet, and he probably at work. I go back through the bushes to Ian with our neighbor's mango.

I hold that mango to my nose and smell, so ono that smell, can smell how juicy sweet. I hold for Ian smell. He close his eyes a little when he wen smell.

That night when we go for dinner, Auntie Rae wen give Ian lickins ‘cause she see mango juice on his shirt and know we took um. She ask him *Uncle Charlie wen give um to you?* and when Ian say *No*, she ask *You steal um?* and he say *Yes* all tears in his eyes, she take her big spoon and hit his okole. I yell for stop, say I wen steal um. I say Ian no like steal um, was my idea. Ian no like steal um, he tell me no. *Then why he said he steal um?* Auntie Rae ask. Ian look at me all tears. I don’t know what for say. *How he get juice on his shirt?* she ask. I think maybe I say I wen squirt him with the mango. But that one lie, and she going know. Auntie Rae hit him again and again and again, on his ‘okole and legs and sometimes the spoon hit his back. I no can take, I go pull Ian away to make her hit me instead. I hate that night.

I like us be out of Auntie Rae’s sight all the time. I get up early, give me and Ian breakfast, and we brush teeth and put on clothes and go play. I want for take sandwiches with us, but I no like her say we steal food from her. We come in when we hungry, and Auntie Rae yell at us for not doing chores. I like tell her how we know for do chores if she no tell us? But I say nothing. Next time we get up early, do chores, then leave. But when we come for lunch, she yell at us for not doing other chores. Next time we wait until she get up for ask what other chores, and she look at us all hard like she no like see us. I wish for school start already.

Fourth time get mango, Aunty Rae told me and Ian was not for us ‘cause we eat already when we stole from Uncle Charlie. She give some to Lani Girl for breakfast, cut in little pieces for Lani Girl to eat. Smell sweet and juicy. Mango like that, you can smell how juicy when stay

ripe. I look at Ian for make sure he okay. He look like he feel shame and feel sad. I give him one long look, for tell him I love him.

Next time get mango, get all trees full of mango at the park where we went, me and Auntie Rae and Ian and Lani Girl. When get so many mango trees all together, is called one mangrove. Those trees is so tall, as tall as the banyan trees in the park. Like huge giants, making shade so it's almost dark. So tall you have to look up to the sky to see their tops, and we wen hear mangoes drop all the way to the ground. Some fall through the leaves and you hear them go crash-crash through the branches then one thud when they hit the ground. So many split when they fall, but others stay whole. All the ground stay covered with their mangoes. All the air stay smelling like sweet sour vinegar wine from the rotting mangoes that split. We make one picnic just outside the darkness of the mangrove under one kukui tree.

~

When my roots went deep enough, I realized I'm not alone

The *ginger* near the wall is fighting bacteria, and the other ginger know it, too.

And the

BIG MANGO TREE feeds me.

TREE t e l l s m e
The BIG MANGO that after all mangoes are gone,

branches will be pruned,
but not mine.

~

Ian never like talk about mom, but I know he stay thinking about her. I started for make up stories at night when we going sleep, stories where mom stay having adventures. I whisper them so Auntie Rae no can hear and so I don't wake up Lani Girl in her crib. I know Auntie Rae going yell at us if Lani Girl wake up or if she hear us talking, and I no like her for hear our stories anyways. I think Ian like the stories, but I not sure 'cause he never say. Tonight mom walking in one forest, one mangrove. I tell Ian stay one mangrove so mom never stay hungry, she just pick up one mango from the ground when she hungry, and all the juices enough for quench her thirst. Stay daytime in that mangrove, but dark 'cause all the tree leaves so thick overhead, so the only light falling on mom is little pieces so she look spotted with light. She smiling 'cause the trees stay talking to her. They tell her how hot the sun, how rain going come but no worry 'cause they get her covered. They tell her the little seedlings stay trying for come up through the earth, the little seedlings no can hear or talk yet, but bumbye going find out all about the world. The trees tell her me and Ian like seedlings, how we no can see her, but we so close. If they knew about Auntie Rae, they wen tell her Auntie Rae stay mad all the time. They tell me for tell Ian mom says she loves him and he one good son. Auntie Rae no can see so many things, and this one thing she no can see right now. I tell Ian mom stay warm and happy in the mangrove, only a couple inches above us.

Sixth time get mango, I wen sneak into Uncle Charlie's yard. All rotten mango on the ground, but I no take mango. I sneak to the big mango tree. I whisper to the tree how Ian stay sad, how Auntie Rae wen give Ian lickings but was my fault. I keep my hands on the trunk when I talk for make sure the tree can hear, 'cause trees no have ears, so maybe they need the vibrations of my hands and my feet on the ground. I tell the tree how Auntie Rae wen yell at us all the time, how the big metal spoon stay hanging on one hook in the kitchen so we can see it all the time. I whisper soft and close, so I can feel my breath come back to my face after it hits the bark. I tell the tree for tell mom. I tell the tree I love mom. The bark smells good, not like rotten-wine mangoes, but like dirt.

2

O u r s p r e a d i n t h e s o i l

r o o t s c a n o p e n e s

We dream together, pulsing connections

of mycelium and

roots.

2

Seventh time get mango was first day of school. Auntie Rae wen cut um up in one bowl for go with breakfast. She say how Uncle Charlie's big mango tree still giving fruit; was strange 'cause September already and most mango trees almost pau giving fruit. She all smiling, giving

Lani Girl fruit, talking. Was first time I wen see her like this. Ian no know what for do. He jus' wen sit and eat his Rice Krispies. The Krispies going *pop! pop! pop!* but he never put his ear close like he wen do when was him and mom and me. I notice he no take mango, even though was there for us. Before we left Auntie Rae wen tell us no lose our crayons 'cause she not going buy more. We never wen lose our crayons before, but I never say this. Me and Ian never say nothing to her anymore.

That night, mom stay in the mangrove. I always tell Ian that's where she stay, always. I tell Ian get one big mango tree in that mangrove like the one in Uncle Charlie's yard. The same mango tree, in fact. I ask Ian for tell me what he like mom know about his first day of school: I going tell that big mango tree, and it going tell mom. He never say nothing, just shrug a little, never look me in the eye. I say first day of third grade stay important. He never look up. So I say first day for me, I wen lose my crayons. Ian look up. I knew that going work. I say I wen lose them, and neva mind Auntie Rae. I say I throw my crayons away. How I going color when Mrs. Ho tell me for draw one tree? Ian just look at me, his eyes getting big. I not going color, I say. I going tell Mrs. Ho I wen throw da whole bugga away 'cause my Auntie Rae one doodoo head. Ian, his eyes stay really big now. He look at the door, see if one shadow coming underneath for mean Auntie Rae stay listening. I say I going tell Mrs. Ho Auntie Rae one meanie, and not really my auntie anyway, one ogre lady. But she not going grind my bones for make bread, I tell Ian. She not going grind his bones. She can say whatever she like, and we do what she says and pretend we listen for survive, but no need *really* listen, I tell Ian. 'Cause she not right.

Ian never say nothing.

Today, I tell Ian, I wen tell my evil twin for leave school early. Stay the same evil twin wen throw away the crayons. When I stay at school doing work and making mom proud, my evil twin, she sneak back here and sneak into Uncle Charlie's yard and eat mango. She eat six mangoes, till her opu stay sticking out. Then she sit under that big mango tree and go sleep. And when Auntie Rae get home, my evil twin wen waddle into the kitchen for show off her big opu and her mango-stained shirt, and she take that big spoon off the wall and hit Auntie Rae with it for being bad. You know how Auntie Rae stay bad? I ask Ian. She bad for hitting you. She bad for blaming you for stealing mango, then hitting you. 'Cause she was so wrong, and mom, bumbye she get so mad if she knew. Bumbye she get more mad than that time you wen forget the Easter eggs in your bag and made our room so stink, mom thought was me and made me scrub my bag. I see one little smile creep up Ian's mouth. She get more mad, I tell Ian, than that time our neighbor wen take our cat he never like, and put him out in the canefields and think we never wen know. She get so mad.

But that never really wen happen today, I tell Ian. Today we wen go to the library. I wen find one book I like. I like our teacher. I never like those peas at lunch, stay sour. Your peas was sour? I ask.

Ian makes one yucky face, but shakes his head. He says he never wen eat the peas. He says he ate the rice and the chicken and the orange slice and the milk, even though one kid bigger than him wen ask him for his milk. This makes me proud of him, but I just listen. He says he likes his teacher, Mrs. Yadao. She like do all kine science experiments, wen tell them they going make bubblegum and hatch chicks. He kind of smiling now. He says she going let them take a chick home for keep. I wonder if Auntie Rae going let him, but I never say this.

That night, I wen dream I stay at home. But no one there. I start in me and Ian's room. I look around. All sunlight and pretty. I look at the windows, all bright with sun coming through the jalousies, and at our two beds. I see Ian's dinosaur blanket. We wen forget for take um with us. I go touch those blue and yellow dinosaurs, so soft. I walk out the room and down the hall. Everything so silent. I look into the bathroom on my right, still more sunlight, all the white painted bricks of the wall looking so white, so glossy. The wood frame around the shower and the wood cabinets looking so red, that kine red-brown color. I can see all the lines and swirls and little holes in the wood, so much detail in this dream. I wen walk some more into the living room, the brown carpet hard and scratchy under my feet, so clean 'cause mom like everything always that way. I wen look around, can see the kitchen with the dining table from where I stand. I look around at the couch, all flowers and green cover, the two big poufy round reddish papa chairs I never can remember the name for, looking so soft and cool and comfy like they ready for me climb in, ready for me and Ian to take out the cushions and turn over their bamboo circle frames for make two huge cages we both stay under for pretend we're trapped. No one stay in this house. When I wen wake up, was still night. I wen hear the crickets outside the dark jalousies. I stay crying.

That day after school, after I wen make sure Auntie Rae not home yet, I go in Uncle Charlie's yard to the big mango tree. I wen take off my backpack and set um on the ground. I wen take off my slippers, and walk to the tree so slow. If I see roots, I step on them all gentle with my feet, like my feet stay hugging them, like my feet stay telling the tree I wen come for visit. I get close so I can smell the bark. I hug the tree, both arms against the trunk, my cheek

feeling the scratchy brown. I wen whisper, I wen tell the tree I need so bad for me and Ian to live with my mom all together.

~

There is a *woman in white* in our dreams. I know her in

p u l s e s

from the **BIG MANGO TREE**,

we feel *her*, and

~

Every day Uncle Charlie stay giving Auntie Rae mangoes. He say his tree one crazy tree, think it stay August still yet. Auntie Rae wen take the mangoes and say thank you, smiling funny when she take them from his hand. I think she like him, the way she act. She act all nice and say *thank you*, but I think acting this way stay hard for her, like she putting on one show. I hide my face or try for no kine expression so she never slap um like the one time I wen smile when Uncle Charlie give her mango at the door. Maybe he like her, but I don't think so. I think he giving everyone mango, cause his big mango tree stay really crazy.

That tree, all fruit make its branches like pregnant, and the mangoes drop on the ground in heavy thuds. When I go talk to the tree, stay hard for not step on the slimy and plump vinegar-breath mangoes all split on the ground. And get more little tight green balls growing. Uncle Charlie wen say to Auntie Rae he worried that tree dying, the way it making so much fruit when stay October already. He say the tree never wen do this before. She just take the bag of mangoes and smile all like her mouth trying super hard for be pretty and say thank you. I wonder sometimes how she stay my mom's sister.

~

the *woman in white* walks in a grove of mango trees, and we are there
She is light for carrying so much weight
She tells the Big Mango Tree it must split from the heaviness
there are two seeds that need to break earth, she tells
there is *her daughter* and

the *g i n g e r* , it is fighting b a c t e r i a

~

That day was one weird day, the last day get mangoes in this story.
I wen wake up early, and when I walk past Auntie Rae's room, get Uncle Charlie in her bed. I never wen know what for do. I just stare, and then Uncle Charlie, he wen open his eyes, look at me, then touch Auntie Rae's shoulder. She wen wake up, look at me, her eyes get big, she wen push Uncle Charlie's hand away, and yell at me for get out even though I was in the hallway, and close her door now. I wen close her door really fast and run back to my room.

Ian ask what wen happen, and I not sure what for say. I say Uncle Charlie was in Auntie Rae's room. I hear Auntie Rae's voice talking soft and hard, like she in one argument but no one else talking, and hear her say bye to Uncle Charlie, then come and open our door. She look like she going yell, but she just wen stare at me, then Ian, glance at Lani Girl who stay standing in her crib, then stare at me. Her eyes so bright and hard. I just look at her. I like look at the floor, but I afraid for look away 'cause I like see the slap before it comes so I not shock. She just stare,

then ask me what I wen see. I not sure if this one trick question, and I like answer whatever she want me for answer. But I know if I think too long, she going be mad because that means I stay making it up. *I saw Uncle Charlie*, I say, ‘cause she knows that. *And?* she wen ask. *And then you wen tell me for close the door.* She stares at me. Her neck and cheeks stay getting red. *I no like see your face*, she says. *You on thin ice.* And she wen take Lani Girl from her crib and turn around and left. I look at Ian. I think maybe Uncle Charlie wen stay over with Auntie Rae, and do adult things. I not sure exactly what those things are, but I know grown-ups do things together, ‘cause that’s how babies come born, like what my mom told me when two adults love each other very much, like her and my dad, then they make babies. I wonder if Auntie Rae like have one baby with Uncle Charlie.

Me and Ian wen wait in the room for eat breakfast, ‘cause we know Auntie Rae stay drinking coffee and giving Lani Girl breakfast, and Auntie Rae no like see my face. I think maybe I tell Ian stay okay for him for get breakfast, but I not sure. My stomach stay grumbling. I wen look at Ian, and he sitting there looking at me, his hands on his stomach, so I know his stay grumbling at him, too. We wait until we hear Auntie Rae tell Lani Girl for be good, which means she wen put Lani Girl in the play pen, and then we hear the bathroom door close. Me and Ian run out our room with soft feet, to the kitchen for get Rice Krispies. Lani Girl looking at us from the play pen, she so cute. She wen gurgle and try for probably say *Hi, how you?* *I like more Rice Krispies* and I tell her for hush, but nice. That girl always hungry. When me and Ian get our bowls all ready, we wen hear the toilet flush. We look at each other, and I start for eat as fast as I can. Ian, he follow. Auntie Rae wen come in from the hall. She pause, looking at us. *Wha’ choo tink?* Auntie Rae wen say, then one other pause. *Dis one feed trough?* She ask. *You*

two stay horses, standing up eating li'dat? I wen stop and look at her, and I feel milk on my chin. She wen come over, take our two bowls, open the door, and throw the food outside on the ground. Go eat like animals, den. She walk back to the kitchen and put the bowls in the sink. Your modda, she wen let you do dat? All kine whatever you like? Ho, Pearl stay so sof, favorite everyting. Don' choo look at me li'dat, girl! Your modda wen spoil you! Go! I no like look at you, I said! Go, girl! What? She wen look at Ian, he in the corner, trying for be nothing. I no can deal right now! I said, go! I wen grab Ian's hand and we ran out the door.

We wen run around the side of the house, in between Auntie Rae's house and Uncle Charlie's. Ian, he start for cry. I wen tell him it going be okay, and I wen try for hug him, but he push me away. So we just sit with our backs against the wall, looking at the big ginger bushes. I know it stay all my fault. I wen see something, and I wen stand up eating at the table like one animal, making Ian act that way, too. I know my mom would be shame for think her daughter like that. I think one crazy world where Auntie Rae stay right about something.

We wen sit there for one long time, it start getting hot. I start for smell the milk on the front of my pajama shirt. I look down and see the milk stain, kind of yellow on the little unicorns with their blue and purple and green rainbow hair, and I remember the milk that was on my chin and try for wipe it with my shirt even though it stay dry now. I start drawing in the dirt with one little stick, making no kine shapes and patterns. Ian just sitting. I worry he more confused than when Auntie Rae wen beat him. I not sure how that possible, 'cause she never wen do nothing this time except yell at us for leave. But I know stay my fault he feeling like this.

The sun stay straight above us now, and the edge of the roof stay making shade, making one line right near our feet with one side in shade and one side in sun. Even though get shade on our feet, we can feel the heat. At least the wall stay cool.

I stay stinking little bit now. I look at Ian for see if he get milk stains on his shirt. I remember we have chores we never wen do, and I wonder if we going get in trouble for not doing them.

I so used to the rotting mango smell from Uncle Charlie's yard, I never wen notice we smelling um all morning. I only wen realize when my stomach tell me I stay super hungry. But I never wen take mango from his yard since Auntie Rae wen beat Ian. I wonder if we can go back in the house for get food. I wen look at Ian, he looking at ants in the dirt, poking some with the tip of his finger for be really gentle and see what they do. I ask if he hungry. He never wen look at me. I think maybe 'cause I wen always make trouble. I wen ask again, and he pretend like he never wen hear me, still touching those little ants. This, it wen make one push on my heart like someone wen go inside and hit just that part. I never move. Then I wen get up, and walk through the ginger bushes into Uncle Charlie's yard.

~

a woman in white

Start with this: There is and a **big** mango tree.

a girl and a boy

~

Stay looking like what I think the dreams with mom look like, with the mango tree and all yellow light coming through the branches in little spots where not dark from the leaves. Only the ground stay covered with yellow and orange and brown mangoes all split. I hear one other one fall to the ground and make one thud. The branches hanging all heavy close to the ground 'cause of the weight, all every part with fruit hanging on ready for fall, and more little green balls ready for grow big. Stay one little mango tree sapling, I notice. One little one growing near the edge of the speckled shade the big mango tree makes. I breathe in the vinegar wine breath through my nose, so deep. Stay little bit sweet smell in there, but rancid yet. I wen hear one rustle behind me, and when I look, Ian stay coming through the bushes.

I wen walk to the tree, making my bare feet go on the roots, and trying for miss the rotting mangoes, but my feet still get sticky. When I get to the trunk, I wen give the tree one hug, like I always do, and keep my palms all flat against the bark and press my cheek against it, too, so that I feel how scratchy. I feel Ian standing near me, so I wen whisper to him for tell the tree *hi*. He wen stand there like he thinking, then wen hug the tree, too. We stand there, hugging the big mango tree who stay so full that Uncle Charlie think it going die. I wen reach my hand down a little, and put my palm over Ian's hand. He never wen move.

After we stay that way for one long time, I wen back up a little, and go find one fruit on the ground stay ripe but not rotting. I never say nothing to Ian. I hungry, and I think I wen do so many bad things already. I wen press the tips of my fingers into the smooth and sticky outside until I get one hole, then I wen pull and peel it apart and put it to my mouth for suck the juices and eat.

~

the Big Mango Tree knows what to do, it's the doing that might kill it but

if there is no split no risk no then it's the not doing that kills

32

mangoes and pieces of bark flying, and she screaming, hitting the branches and trying for run away and push the branches back. I wen run to Ian and drag him away, he too shock for cry or stand up, just push at the ground with his feet for move faster. We wen go as far from the tree as we can to the ginger bushes, staring at the big moving branches and Auntie Rae's arms both swinging and punching and pushing, her feet digging into the ground, dirt clouds and falling mangoes and flying bark and Auntie's screams. The branches wen push Auntie Rae into the mouth and the mouth wen start closing around her, she screaming and reaching out. When the mouth close all the way, we no can hear her screams anymore. The tree wen creak back to how was before, more bark flying.

The tree stay still, nothing moving. Just leaves and dirt and bark dust stay floating to the ground in the yellow sunlight. So many mangoes on the ground I cannot see any grass or roots, and the branches hanging higher than before. We breathing hard, staring at the place where the mouth used to be, and where Auntie Rae used to be. Then I wen hug Ian tight and run through the bushes with him back to our house. We both crying, and pretty soon our crying make Lani Girl cry in her play pen. We just sit on the living room couch, as far away in the house from the tree as we can, and hugging each other and crying.

Uncle Charlie wen call the police and say Auntie Rae went missing.

Me and Ian living with Aunty Betty and Uncle Marcus now. After the police wen think me and Ian making up stories, we never wen tell Aunty Betty what really wen happen to Aunty Rae. We like be good for Aunty Betty and Uncle Marcus. Lani Girl stay with her grandma.

I never would believe the tree wen eat Auntie Rae if Ian never seen um, too.

~

Memba when

girl, boy
 in to
 this womb
 seedlings,my
bark parts for you
to g e r m i n a t e
full again and
break surface
 a n d
 grow

but

no girl,no boy.

You

Rae.

germinate full
 Rae
you buried it too deep,
 too deep

Cause I try fo'get um. But
da roots wen grow anyway
da sprout kep' breaking soil.

Rae, you cut the sprout all your life.

It kep' growing back.

I know.

I neva wada da earth.
I like let um grow,
I like memba, but.

Maybe now, rememba.

~

Babies get one smell, all powder rice milk dusty sweet. Like gauze, that smell; can see um, can look through um. Da smell stuck to da back of Vai's ears even when came one toddler. Me and Pearl and mom use to smell um. Sometimes I smell um still, out of nowhere I smell Vai.

~

Where you go when you die? I wonder this when Vai wen die, both times. You was here, then you not. Where you now? Must be somewhere, feels like.

Dis picture, was from da funeral. I like throw um away, but I cannot. Mom, she smooth Vai's hair when he stay in da coffin, she touch his cheek.

I think stay easier when you believe something. Grandma, she believes; mom, she believes, but I cannot. I wish I believe, den no more dis kine like I get. But mom, she still cry even though she say Vai in heaven.

He was making things, was breathing air, was making dents on all parts of my life. Just all disappear. Blow away.

Dis picture of Vai, he helping dad wash da car. He holding da hose in fronta him like he stay peeing, he tink so funny! Mom, she wen stand far back, warn us not for get her wet while she taking pictures.

Dis one, same day, Vai realize he can fit in da bucket.

Dis one, me and Pearl, we wen convince Vai for let us use da last of da lipstick mom wen give us for make him *pretty*. Oh, we wen paint his lips, paint two round circles for make like blush... we end up covering half his face in da pink-red lipstick.

Dis one, Pearl's birthday number four. Me and Pearl kept giving Vai little pieces of cake in his high-chair, and he wen grab em up with his small fat hand, stuff em in his mouth, white frosting on his nose, white frosting around his mouth, all over his hands and even his chest.

Dis one, was dat morning, on da beach. Mom threw um in da trash, but I took dis one out and kept um in my room.

~

My dad wen dig Vai out.

We playing chase masters. I in charge cause I da oldest. Mom, she tell me foa watch Pearl and Vai when she and dad like stay on top da sand and we like go in da wada. She tell me no let Vai go in da wada, but neva say nothing bout Pearl, but I know not foa let Pearl go past her knees cause I wen watch her plenny times already.

We run fast, me and Pearl run in and out da wada, splashing each other and Vai. I run fast foa try catch Pearl cause she quick, but fake-kine run when try foa catch Vai. Vai laughing, chasing, stopping when he get to da wada edge, me yelling at him foa stay on da sand, him screaming little bit when da wada touch his toes. We run round and round chasing chasing, I splashing splashing Vai and Pearl, Pearl splashing splashing moa and moa, in and out, chase and chase, so hard foa run sometimes cause we laughing, and Pearl, she push Vai-Boy play kine, and he dive into da sand cliff and it fall on top him, and we laugh and laugh so hard. But da sand neva move. Pearl, she still laughing, but da sand neva move. I dig foa get Vai out. It stay like wada, da sand, all going in where I dig um out. I yell Pearl foa help. I stay digging, I find something smooth, stay his leg, I stay digging. I yell Pearl foa help, she not laughing anymore. I stay digging. I stay digging.

Sand stay pretty when you look at em up close. All shiny, smooth, each piece. Sand still stay in Vai's lungs.

~

I neva wen see him

WHO DA FADDA? I neva going say.

cause mom wen throw da sheets away,

Was neva one fadda, Chris. What choo tink one fadda is? One kid like her, one fadda? One fifteen-year-old boy, one fadda?

I carrying Vai in my belly. That's what I going call him: Vai. I rub my belly where I feel him. One little magic bean growing. One little magic seed. I see da girls stay hapai, big-bellies floating heavy in fronta dem when dey walk in da portable classroom with da other girls stay hapai, and I tink I going be one a dem soon, my big belly floating with Vai. But no one know yet, just me and Vai.

YOU TELL ME, GIRL. I neva going say.

OOHHHHHHHH Da light turn on and I see Pearl's face, staring wide eyes mess-up hair at me, and I, oooooohhhhh.... OOHHHH I hear her gasp, and my legs, all wet between my thighs, all warm like I wen OH, I rip da sheet back and stay all red on da white sheets, all red all over, OH she start screaming and I tink I going die and I wish I want my OOHHH I want my my mom I want

She just wen throw um in da trash.

His name was Vai.

~

I stay kissing Kalani near da gym, on da side so no teachers see. Afta school, can smell his boy smell cause so hot all day, he so sweaty-stinky, but make me all throb down there. His tongue stay warm, too. He so nice, he neva do tings like odda boys do, like touch my tits. He just do whatever I like, he so happy for do whatever I like. I tink, how one girl like me stay kissing one nice guy like him, but I neva tink li'dat too long cause I tinkin how much I like him touch my tits. I take his hand and put um on my waist, take his other hand and put um on da brick wall, and he take da cue and lean in, kiss more hard, and

I see Pearl standing there all big eyes. Fuck, what you doing, girl? I said stay da library, choose some books. Kalani's face getting all red now, he looking at Pearl out da corner of his eye, say Hi Pearl. He so nice, you little shit girl, you supposed to stay da library. What I tell you? Go da library now! She turn and run, but too late, cause Kalani, I see how he look at me now. I take his hand and put um on my waist, but he neva hold um like he did. He just keep um there cause he one nice boy.

Befoa Vai-Boy wen drown in da sand, our parents, they kiss. I neva memba when I notice they neva kiss no moa, but one day I realize I wen notice foa one long time.

~

I swipe Pearl's lashes quick with da wand. Her lashes already so long, so sof', so curly. She look me now with one eye frame super dark curly long, like one strange wink. She get sof'-sof' brown eyes. And quick with da wand. I no like poke her eye. She look me again, I flutter my lashes all fancy-silly, she flutter hers with one smile. Dis girl. *You like blush?* She blushes. Dis girl. She no need, no need any of dis, but... I take da blush compact from da bed, swirl da little brush in da cake sparkly pink call Tickle, bright pink just like da blanket on da bed, and tap swipe super-gently each cheek. Not too much, no like look like one whore. *Oh, look you,* I hold up da mirror of da blush compact. She look, move little to da left, little to da right, so can see all her face. *You like lipstick?* I look her face, take out Bubble Gum, Passionate Pink, Cherries in da Snow, Ravish Me Red. I think Bubble Gum. No like look like one whore. *Open your mouth, li' dis, and make um all sof, all relax. Oh, look you.* I think too much for Pearl, she already like one ripe mango, but. I hold up da blush compact mirror. I like watching her look herself, look her new eyelashes, look her shiny pink lips, look her cheeks little more bright pink, little bit sparkly. Can smell da bubble gum from da gloss. She start for smile, then her smile start for go away.

Aunty said makeup is for girls who like be whores. Girls who tease boys and, And I slap her face. I neva know what I stay doing, but I jus'... wen slap her face, hard. She look shock, look me, get tears start pearling in her eyes, pearls start overflowing down her cheeks. I neva know what I wen do. We stay looking each other, sitting on da bed, on her pink blanket.

~

What do you want to say about yourself today?

Today I going be electric blue, cherry pop red. *You gotta get a hold on dat girl.* Make my lips like candy, smell sooo sweet, make da boys tink I like do things with my cherry pop lips. Make their dicks stick outta their shorts in gym, they so easy, nothing for cover em up except that one ball.

I hear you wen have one baby, one abortion baby. I pop da girl's lip, red as cherries. I pop her head, get on top and start pounding, make her one regret.

~

In enough flavors to keep all the promises you make.

I listen you breathing heavy and long so I know you asleep. I no can see you, but I know you stay with just your sheet and no pink blanket cause little bit hot. I listen to da crickets, to da mrrrowwwwl of da neighborhood cat fighting Stussy. I know Stussy going win cause she one tita cat. Can see da outline of your Precious Moments doll, of da stuff turtle name Henry guarding you.

~

Rae, we not doing nothing.

You know da boys only like one ting?

Just going to da movies.

What about befoa da movies, afta da movies?

I go wit Rachel, double-date.

How long you been going with Greg?

Robert. Greg was last week.

I cannot believe mom neva wen ask you dis.

I neva like get serious.

So you like be called one slut?

No one going call me nothing.

Dey going call you one slut, is what going happen. Going make up all kine stories. No need da truth when get stories, Pearl.

Shut up, Rae,

Alls it takes is one boy, say you went all da way,
den dey all going say

you went all da way,

Den all da boys going speck dat from you.

Den what?

Wha'choo going do?

I going, Rae.

Oh, you *going*.

I not like you.

Wha'choo mean?

Nothing.

No. What choo mean?

Nothing, I said.

I know. No need say. You know what? Das my point.

Right there.

~

She get her pretty pink hat she wear all da time, all da straight As, all da smiles, my sister knows how for smile. I thought I knew how for smile, den I saw her. Since she was one little girl, dat smile, those eyes. For sure she charm anykine ting. I try on her hat, look myself in da mirror. But get lines on my face already, straight ones look like someone wen draw between my eyes. I not one aunty. I throw da hat on her bed.

~

Rae, you scared?

It going be alright, Rae. You see.

An' she going have all the love, spoiled,

Get your hand off my belly

I going spoil her.

you betta watch out, Rae. keep her away from aunty.

Shut up.

What's your problem, Rae? What I do?

Jus' shut up. She no need no one.

Rae.

I know what you think. Same thing you thought in high school. You put
on your pretty face, make like is all right.

If anyone is thinking anything, is you, Rae. Not me.

Das right. You neva think nothing.

~

Rae,

I cut da sprout all my life.

Susanna Stories

There was a child named Susanna who lost almost all memory of her Great Grandma Bella. Her parents told her she and Grandma Bella used to have breakfast together every morning, but Susanna did not remember this. Her parents told her that she and Grandma Bella used to spend hours coloring and talking about elephants, and cats, and what snow is like, but Susanna did not remember this, either. Her parents told her that she used to lie on Grandma Bella's bed very quietly, and watch Wheel of Fortune with her grandma in grandma's room, and that Grandma Bella liked this. Susanna thought that maybe she could remember this, but wondered if she was making up the memory. A day after Grandma Bella died, Susanna remembered her. A week after she died, she still remembered her, and talked about her. She still remembered her after a month. But at some point, gradually, Susanna started forgetting. She talked about Grandma Bella with her mom, and how she missed her, but little pieces were flaking away from the picture of Grandma Bella and she didn't even notice, until one day the only picture Susanna had was the one her mom and dad told her about.

Susanna had a younger sister named Elise. Elise never knew Great Grandma Bella. One day Susanna realized that it was almost as if she, like Elise, had never known her, either. Susanna did not like this thought.

Susanna looked for Grandma Bella in the albums her mom kept, and found pictures of an old woman with white hair sitting on the beach wearing a hat. *That's the same beach we go to,* her mom told her. *The one down the street; can you tell? Grandma Bella liked to sit in the beach chair and watch the waves. She had never seen the Pacific Ocean before she came to live with us.* Susanna thought she recognized the same beach in the background. She asked what

Grandma Bella saw before she saw the ocean. Her mom told her Grandma Bella was a city girl. Susanna didn't really know what that meant.

Susanna looked for Grandma Bella in the room that still had the little television with the two dials and the bed, and was now the "guest room." She stood in the closet that was empty except for the vacuum cleaner and two extra blankets on the top shelf, and smelled the air because it smelled like the vacuum cleaner and wood, but also like something else that she wondered about, that was a little like flowers. Sometimes she would smell the blanket and mattress on the bed, and they smelled like soap and cotton and also a little like flowers. Maybe Grandma Bella had smelled like flowers.

Susanna looked for Grandma Bella in her mom's jewelry box, in the necklace and earrings and two rings that her mom said had been Grandma Bella's. One of the rings had a large green stone that her mom said was jade, and the other was gold, and her mom said that one had been Grandma Bella's wedding ring. Susanna tried on both, and both were too big, even for her thumbs. Grandma Bella had worn these rings on her fingers.

Susanna had also forgotten about Jonah, until she asked who the little boy was wearing the purple T-Rex shirt in a picture of her fourth birthday. Her mom said *That's Jonah*. Susanna asked who he was again, and her mom said he had been her friend.

Susanna looked hard at his face. She asked if Jonah had lived across the street, and her mom said *Yes*.

When we forget something, it feels like it never happened. What happens when we forget someone?

Sometimes, when it got dark but before bedtime, Susanna went into her and Elise's closet with all the lights off and the closet door closed, to see how long she could stay in the dark. Things seemed to disappear in the dark. Have you ever been in such darkness that you placed your hand on your body because it felt possible you weren't there anymore? But of course you knew you were.

~ ~ ~

One morning Susanna's sister, Elise, found Rainbow Dash the fighting fish floating at the top of the bowl. When Elise reached a finger in and touched Rainbow Dash, she found the fish much colder and wetter than she expected, and a little slimy. Elise cried, and did not know what to do with her finger that was wet and smelled like her fish.

Susanna was sent to her room for yelling at their dad. *You can't get another Rainbow Dash*, she insisted. *Rainbow Dash is dead*.

Later that day, when Elise showed Susanna the new Rainbow Dash in Rainbow Dash's bowl with Rainbow Dash's treasure chest and little blue marbles, Susanna asked where they had put Rainbow Dash. Susanna was grounded the rest of the day after yelling at their dad for flushing Rainbow Dash down the toilet.

Susanna called the new Rainbow Dash *Your New Fish*.

Did you feed Your New Fish?

Yeah, show me Your New Fish's trick.

Your New Fish's water is dirty.

Elise eventually asked Susanna why she didn't call the fish Rainbow Dash. *Do you want to forget Rainbow Dash?*

Susanna began to tell Elise stories.

~ ~ ~

There are things that grow in the dark. They are greedy, and like to steal.

- *Steal?*

Take things that don't belong to them. To keep. They're sneaky. You won't even notice what they took is gone. Then one day you'll realize it's not there. You'll think you lost it, but really one of them took it.

- What do they take?

Anything they want. What matters most to you. They might take your coloring books.

- No, they wouldn't.

Or your Little Pony, Rainbow Dash.

- I would stop them.

Or your new fish.

- I would tell mom.

They already took Rainbow Dash.

- No, they didn't.

Yes, they did.

- Rainbow Dash is in the bowl.

No, she's not.

*

Sometimes the things that grow in dark corners live under beds and in closets. Other times they blend into shadows that are already there, but if you look closely, you'll see extra shadows, and that's how you know it's them. They look like anything that's in the dark or the shade.

- You're lying.

No, I'm not. They sit and wait. They're patient.

*

One day, a little girl was playing outside.

- Is this about the dark things?

Shh! Just listen. The little girl was doing her favorite thing, spinning round and round in the grass.

- I like to do that.

And she was spinning round and round so much so she was dizzy and fell down.

- That's fun.

But then when she got up, she noticed she had two shadows. She thought it was because she was really dizzy. But no, there were really two. She bent down and touched both of them. They

both seemed real. So she decided to keep playing, and forgot all about them. When she was done, the extra shadow followed her into the house. She had a cat. What's the cat's name?

- Rainbow Dash.

The shadow took Rainbow Dash.

- What?

The shadow took Rainbow Dash.

- Where?

Away. The same place it took your fish.

- It didn't take my fish.

Then where's the *first* Rainbow Dash?

- I'm telling.

*

- I don't want a story about shadows.

Shhh! Just listen.

- Tell me about peg-sus. I want a story about peg-sus. Or horses.

Once there was a little girl. She never listened to her big sister. All she did was play with her My Little Ponies and color unicorns and

- Hey!

Shhh, I said. And she was a tattletale. Then one night, she went to bed. The shadows came.

- No!

And then – Elise! Elise, come back!

*

- You always tell me stories.

One day, a little girl heard about the things in the dark corners.

- No, not the corners! I'm going.

This one is different.

She told her friend it was stupid, and that monsters aren't real because her mom said so. When the little girl got home, she did her homework, and played with her friends, and ate dinner with her family. She knew the stories, but didn't believe.

That night as the little girl started to fall asleep, the darkness moved. Like shadows from a candle, but slowly. The shadows changed shape just enough so that they looked a little different, but if you stared hard you couldn't be sure that they didn't always look that way.

The little girl watched the dark corners. She watched them and listened to her parents as they went to bed. The nightlight was on, but that doesn't get rid of all the dark. She wanted to turn on the light, but then she remembered the story. If she got up from her bed, she'd have to walk away from the nightlight to where the light switch was, in the dark. If she called her parents, they'd have to come through the dark to get to her. So she watched.

In the morning, the girl was gone. Her mom came to wake her up, but she wasn't in her bed.

- I don't like that story. I'm telling mom.

~ ~ ~

Susanna pulled the dark blue sheets together that hung over the side of the bunk bed and fastened them shut with a coffee bag clip. She looked first into Hailey's eyes; then at Hailey's younger brother, Kian; and last, her little sister, Elise. "There are things that grow in the dark. If you're not careful, they'll snatch you away,"

"No," interrupted Elise. "I don't want a shadow story."

"Don't worry," said Hailey. "It's just a story. It's not true."

"That's what mom said," Elise told Hailey. "Mom said Susanna makes them up to scare me."

"Just listen." Susanna took a breath. "There *are* things that grow in the dark. And if you're not careful, they *will* snatch you away. There was once a little girl who wasn't afraid because her mommy told her nothing would hurt her, and she believed it. So one day she was walking home from school. When she first started walking, everything looked normal, but then she noticed that she had two shadows--"

"No!"

"Be quiet, Elise. One on her right, and one on her left. Both looked the same. She looked up at the sun, and thought the one on her right was the real one, so she talked to the one on the left. 'Shadow,' she said. 'Hey, Shadow!' But it didn't answer, so she turned around and kept on walking.

"But it wasn't a shadow. As soon as she turned around, it grabbed her real shadow, killed it, and ate it. And then the fake shadow followed her home..." Elise was covering her ears.

“It followed her into the house. She didn’t notice it was there, because it always stayed behind her. It wasn’t a real shadow, so it could do that. It smelled her; these things that grow in the dark like the way some people smell. When it thought her mom or dad or big sister would see it, the shadow crouched in a dark corner and waited until it could have time all alone with the little girl. Its best times were when she was in her room playing with her Rainbow Dash and other ponies. It would sniff all up and down her neck, smelling the strawberry shampoo,” Elise squeezed her eyes shut, “and watch over her shoulder as she made her ponies jump and fly and talk to each other. It did this every day, and the little girl never noticed. She doesn’t even notice right now, how it’s just behind her – ”

“Stop it! Stop it!”

“Aw, Elise, it’s just a story.” Hailey put an arm on Elise’s back.

“Peeking over her shoulder, so close it could eat her, and that’s what they do – ”

“I’m telling!”

“No, Elise! Come back! Aw, now she’s gonna tell,” said Hailey. “Why do you have to make it so scary? And then she tells and then we get in trouble.”

~ ~ ~

That night after Hailey and Kian went home, there was a power outage. Elise and Susanna were excited when their dad took out the candles and the two fancy silver oil lamps with the glass bulbs that he said were called the lamp *shades*. They ate sandwiches by candle and lamp light, and Elise and Susanna took turns turning the wicks on the oil lamps up high so that

the flame flickered tall and a little wild, licking the tops of the shades at the place called the *chimney*, and then down again so the flame was so tiny it almost looked like it might go out. They knew their mom might not let them do this, but she was coming home late from work. The smiling faces of Susanna's sister and dad reflected brighter and fuller in the orange-yellow heat when the wicks were high, and slowly disappeared into the darkness behind them when they turned the wicks low. Susanna turned the wicks so that the flames rose past the chimney and swayed tall in the air. Her dad instructed her to turn them lower; they should not smoke, he said. But there were too many shadows. He scolded her when she turned the wicks high again, said he would take the lamps away if she didn't listen. Turning them high was not safe. When their mom got home, she smiled when she saw the three of them at the table with the sandwiches, candles, and lamps.

Elise and Susanna went to bed a little earlier that night than they usually did. Their mom told them that because the electricity was out, they could not have a nightlight. Elise asked her to read *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book*. Did Elise want their mom stay longer with the oil lamp? Because Susanna did. According to Dr. Seuss, residents across the land fell to sleep; it was *quite catching, you see. Like a cough*. Sleep overtook them; they could not resist. Sleep feels good. These words were familiar. Elise was asleep by the time their mom got to the end. Susanna asked her mom if she could leave the lamp, but her mom said she could not because that would not be safe. Susanna asked if she could read another book, and her mom asked her if she was scared of the dark. *No*, said Susanna. *What are you scared of?* her mom asked. Only pieces of her mom's face and arms and chest existed in the lamp glow; the other parts vanished into the darkness.

The dark.

What's scary about the dark?

It's not that, it's

I can't say it

We can't see in the dark.

No.

Do you think there are things in the dark you can't see?

Yes.

Like what?

...things.

say it's not real

What are those things?

I don't know.

you know

Monsters?

Yes.

Like monsters in closets? Under your bed?

Not that kind.

Monsters are in stories, to frighten us. They're not real. It's fun to tell scary stories. But when you go to sleep at night and it's dark, then it's not fun, is it?

No.

don't go away

Lie down. I'll rub your back.

~ ~ ~

Susanna awoke the next morning. She couldn't remember falling asleep the night before, but the sun came through the louvered windows and she smelled pancakes and spam and coffee and heard Elise's giggles from the kitchen. It must be late.

Elise was near the stove with their dad, tiptoed on her stepstool from the bathroom to see the pancakes. Susanna wanted to stand on the bottom step so she could see the pancakes better, but instead said, "There's a shadow behind you, Elise." Elise and their dad both looked at her.

"I don't want to hear about shadows, Susanna," said their dad.

Susanna felt her tongue inside her mouth. She didn't want to talk about shadows, either.

Elise turned back to the pancakes, and Susanna climbed up behind her. "Ready!" Elise said, and their dad flipped the cakes. "Can you do it in the air like on t.v.?" Elise wanted to know. "Where you do it with just the pan?"

"Not here." Their dad smiled. "I'd miss some. Where do you think they'd go?"

"We need a dog for that!" said Elise.

"Soft, your mom's not up yet."

"*We need a dog,*" Elise whispered.

"*No.*"

At the table, Susanna watched Elise and her mom and dad. It didn't look like there were any shadows. Their mom read the newspaper; the power outage was because of fallen power

lines. “Shadows,” whispered Susanna. Her dad looked at her. “I didn’t mean to,” she said. She knew she’d be sent to her room if it happened again. And she wasn’t even done with her pancakes. She ate quickly.

Outside, Susanna and Elise spread a beach towel on the lawn, and Susanna ran across the small street to get Hailey and Kian. They would probably play house; the little kids liked that game best. If there wasn’t something big to deal with, like dinosaurs or a tornado, it got boring fast.

Fifteen minutes after cooing to Elise and Kian as they babbled and whined, making dinner with Hailey out of grass and little yellow flowers, and trying to get the neighbor’s orange tabby involved as a lion who might attack the family and thus make the game much more interesting, Susanna had forgotten all about that morning. “Let’s tell stories!”

“No, no stories!” whined Elise. “I don’t wanna be scared. I wanna play house.”

“But this is boring,” said Susanna.

“No, it’s not” – “It’s not boring for you because all you do is sit there and whine” – “Can we just play something already? I don’t want to play house anymore, either” – “But I don’t wanna be scared!” – “Susanna, promise you won’t tell anything too scary. Promise, Susanna.”

“Let’s just play already, okay?”

The children took the towel into a small clearing in the ginger bushes. They sat in a circle, knees touching.

“There are shadows all around us, right now,” said Susanna. She stopped. Elise looked like maybe she was going to cry.

...*And* something, something just touched, maybe lingered in the frizzy halo of Elise's hair...but. Nothing.

"Susie, tell a story about... a magical tree. Or mermaids. Yeah?" Hailey turned to Elise.
"Mermaids. Tell a story about mermaids."

"Who have magic horses," said Elise.

"Yeah, like seahorses, only they can fly up out of the water like flying fish!" said Hailey.
"And they're all sorts of colors."

"Like rainbow ones. Rainbow colors, with flying wings." Elise was smiling. So was Kian. "And the mermaids ride on the flying horses!"

Susanna felt her mouth move before she knew why. "There was a little girl named Elise. She woke up on a bright, sunny morning. She and Rainbow Dash had breakfast together. All the Rainbow Dashes." This was not mermaids. "Rainbow Dash the fish and Rainbow Dash the pony and Rainbow Dash the teddy and Rainbow Dash the cat who no one can see." But Elise was smiling. "They were having so much fun, they didn't even notice how Elise's mom and dad and sister weren't there." Susanna closed her mouth, but it was like swallowing thick air, air that was full of words already formed. And as she concentrated on keeping her mouth closed, she knew the words would come back up in a burp she wouldn't be able to stop. Hailey was squinting at her a little. She tried to breathe only through her nose, but it was coming, she could feel it, and she thought she knew what she was going to say. But this time she didn't want to.

"Then one of the Rainbow Dashes wanted to know if it was the real Rainbow Dash." That wasn't so bad. "Elise said yes. Then all the rest wanted to know if they were the real ones, too, and she told them all yes. *But how can we all be Rainbow Dash?* Then someone spoke who

no one had noticed before. It was behind Elise the whole time, but no one saw. It told them that it would decide. But it was a liar. It went to each Rainbow Dash and sniffed, smelling for a smell that was just right. It pretended to decide, but it had already taken the real Rainbow Dash a long time ago, the one that came before the second fish. It already knew who it wanted. It stopped at Elise. It sniffed her. *You*, it said to Elise. *You are for me*,”

Susanna slapped her hands over her mouth, but she spoke through them, the words muffled,

“You are the one I choose. You are mine, said the shadow,”

And she was almost sure she saw something behind her sister, maybe...

“You I will eat,”

This was the story, but she didn’t want it to be,

“Now I will eat,”

Not anymore,

Susanna closed her eyes. She heard Elise starting to cry, Hailey saying something. This was never the story she wanted.

Susanna opened her eyes, and wasn’t sure if what she was seeing was real. It was like the world flickered, a flame that changed from the four of them in the ginger bushes with Hailey looking confused and Elise and Kian scared, to one with just her and Elise, and *A shadow*, just behind Elise. Transparent and dark, blending and not...

Flicker,

The story. “Run, Elise!” Susanna screamed. But Elise wasn’t running.

Flicker,

The story.

Flicker,

My story.

Flicker,

Her story.

Flicker,

“Elise! ... Elise runs through the ginger bushes and into the house!” Susanna yelled, and Elise was running. “To find mommy and daddy,” and then Susanna felt her tongue give over, felt that burp rise up,

Flicker,

“The shadow was a half-second behind. When Elise got to the house, there was no mommy, no daddy. They were gone. The shadows had eaten them already,”

Flicker,

My story.

“That’s not how I want the story to go! Susanna runs through the bushes. Susanna runs up the steps behind her sister. Susanna grabs the not-shadow off her sister’s back, and... and takes it into the sun! No. No, I don’t take it into the sun. I tell the shadow it doesn’t belong here. And because it’s *My Story*, the shadow *poofs*. It’s gone!”

Flicker,

Flicker,

“And because it’s *My Story*, not anything else’s, I say you have no say. I say, *I tell the story*. I say, you’re gone!”

Rememba

Da air sour with da scent of ripe, rotting mango. Like breathing sweet wine, dat smell. Speckle light through long leaves. Damp dirt rising warm from da earth, smoothing da smell of wine with da smell of da forest, steaming. All mango trees, all directions, no can see da end, jus' going on and on.

Dis right here, dis real and not real. No can deny da senses.

I see one flash of white, one person running in da trees. I tink... but cannot be.

She fast, da woman in white,
Run round and round chasing chasing,
I running running, faster faster
She running running, moa and moa
Weave in and out da trees,
Running running
In and out
Chase and chase

Rae, you scared?

Aunty said makeup is for girls who like be whores, girls who tease boys and

Open your mouth, li' dis, and make um all sof, all relax

I not like you

Chase and chase

no one know yet,

In and out

One little magic bean growing

All shiny, smooth, each piece.

I hear you wen have one baby,

just me and Vai.

pearls overflowing

Running running

Sometimes I smell um

out of nowhere I smell Vai.

I lose her. I lost her. I know her. How can be one dream if I sweating li' dis? Breathing hard, I sit on da earth. Da colors here, all sepia and green and yellow. Da earth with red, red dirt. My body all salty sweat, but. Tears too. Did they ever stop?

Rae, you

I cut da sprout all my life,

you

Pearl, I neva wada da earth. I wen stop. I jus'

Where da whispers coming from? From da air, but da ground stay like small vibrations. I lie down, moa vibrations vibrations all over in my body. I turn my ear to da ground, and like digesting, da sounds, all movements and like one belly digesting, one belly all sounds I feel in my belly, my head buzzing my piko, my my tingles little shocks all my seeds twin sides deep in me stay talking inside me, how I cannot stop my tears did they ever stop

Rae

I open my eyes and see Pearl's eyes. Looking at me, sof' sof' brown eyes, long curly lashes, Pearl. did they ever stop

Rae

I sit up, da tingles still going. Pearl sits up, looks at me. I realize I not surprise she has all her long silky hair, da white stay not on her head but she wearing some kine white long tunic, but anywhere I look close 'cept her eyes like I cannot focus too hard.

Rae

Her lips neva move but I hear her voice, jus' like she talking. For one second, I like make funna all da *Raes* she keep saying. But She smiles, little bit.

Dis not one dream, no dream stay one sista ghost with one shared sense of huma

I wen give you these

She open her hands, inside stay two seeds, big ones like mango when you open up da husk, all ready for be planted.

She hold her hands out to me, like offering me to take.
I reach, but
She pull um away to her belly, close her fingers tight.

I wen give you these

*to wada
to sing to
to make sure get enough light
my seeds, I gave my sista
my seeds
I had no choice for make sure they grow strong roots strong stalks myself*

An' then she kep' her eyes on me, burning inside like I neva seen. Shining.
She dug one hole inches deep, put in da first seed on its side and cover um with sof' red dirt.
Another hole inches deep, little seed on its side. You can see da sprout starting already.
Cover um with sof' red dirt.

She humming low, I think da tune only da seeds small enough for hear clearly.
Da rain starts.
She looking at me, we both dripping da earth sighing as rain comes in.
My sista, she turns. Walks away.

I feel something in my palm.
I open,
one seed,
my seed
I feel a tickle on my foot
da root of one mango tree and thin white roots
wrapping gentle,
saying come
I lie down and roots break earth,
reaching up and caressing round
I slide into parting soil
I hold sof' my seed

Sun, Rain, Banyan

Sun, Rain, Banyan, and the Town They Woke Up

By Veronica Maile Dela Cruz

Daughter of Tiare Maile Dela Cruz and Sam Dela Cruz,
Granddaughter of Grandma Bernadette and Papa Javier and Grandma Pearl and Grandpa
Michael,
~~Oldest~~ Eldest Sister to Jon and Malia
Who will become a Great Writer or maybe President.

~~Once upon a time~~ There is a girl who talks to butterflies and trees and listens to what they have to say. Her name is ~~Sarah~~ Sunshine. They tell her a lot of things. Did you know some butterflies fly hundreds of miles? They are called Monarch Butterflies, and she talked to a Super Monarch once. Super Monarchs are the ones that make the longest ~~journies~~ journeys and live the longest, and fly high up like where airplanes fly, they fly all the way from the north in Canada or Maine all the way to Mexico where the Monarch Migration starts again! And Monarchs and Butterflies are especially special to talk to because they live one way then transform into another way of living, sort of like dying and being born in the middle of your life. So they know things other animals and some insects don't. Also trees know things other animals and insects don't because they live for hundreds of years, sometimes thousands, and they talk to each other through their roots and electricity in the ground and through the air. Yes! Electricity, and water in the air! And this girl named Sun was born ~~hearing~~ feeling that electricity and hearing the butterflies and knowing what it means. But talking back was the hard part. How do you talk in electricity to the trees? How do you whisper in butterfly language of ~~pher fera Anemanes!~~ pheromones? How? So for a long time she just listened. And it was better this way, because when you listen you learn more things anyways instead of always

talking about what you think. So when she finally figured out how to talk to butterflies and trees, she had more questions than anything else to say, and asked a lot of questions. In this way Sun became wiser than any girl ~~you would ever meet or boy~~ or boy you would ever meet.

Sometimes she would listen to a butterfly tell her about flying on the air, how the wind pushes up its wings so that it rides on pillows of air, flutter flutter - poof poof - up up! And about how the nectar in different flowers tastes. She tried to taste a flower once, but unfortunately she did not have a ~~probe probab~~ ~~Hibiscus!~~ ~~probiscus~~ proboscis so flowers don't taste the same way to girls as they do to butterflies. But she imagined how they taste by what the butterflies say. She tried to listen to the caterpillars, but they spend so much time munching that they don't really talk much at all. Just much much munch munch munch. When she figured out how to ask the butterflies questions, she tried to use the butterfly language to ask the caterpillars what they thought about turning into butterflies, but they didn't answer back. Not the ones she asked, anyway. They just munched. Maybe the language with butterflies is different than the language with caterpillars. Maybe caterpillars are like babies that don't really know how to talk yet. There are a lot of maybes and questions. Way more questions than answers. I could tell you about all her conversations with the butterflies here, but that is for another story. This story is about her conversations with the trees. One tree, actually.

So one of Sun's favorite trees to talk to ~~was~~ is a banyan tree that lives in a park near her house. She would ask this tree all kinds of questions, and it told her all about how the park had changed in the last 100 years (yes, it was 100 years old!) and about its relatives and the stories they told, and some relatives who were even older, with stories going thousands of years back. You can imagine that Sun listened more than anything else because sometimes you don't

even know enough to know what to ask, you have so many questions where would you even begin? The Banyan told her about talking to other plants, too, ones in the park and even trees miles and miles away. Sun could only talk to trees that were close because she wasn't a tree. But the Banyan wasn't a gossip tree, it just told her stories.

One day, the tree told her a scary story. Which was even more scary because it was real. It told her that there was a place far, far away where there were people who were alive, but who were living asleep. They spent all their time asleep, even going around doing normal things during the day like driving and eating and all that, only sleeping. Sun asked if they were sleepwalking. The tree had never heard the word sleepwalking before, but said that sounded right. They were sleeping and they were also walking and doing stuff at the same time. The tree told her there was a whole town of them, and any person who came to the town was surprised to see all the sleeping people, but soon every human who visited decided to go to sleep and become a sleepwalker, too. Sun asked Why? Why would someone want to do that? The Banyan said that was a ~~big-mystery~~ Big Mystery. The Banyan said the trees who lived in this town couldn't figure it out. They thought maybe it had to do with what animals do when they sleep, in their minds, how the electricity changes and the girl asked Dreams? Yes, Dreams, said the Banyan. The Banyan said the trees think the dreams are good ones. All the people are smiling all the time. Which is crazy, said the Banyan, because that town is falling apart and all the food is rotting and all the houses are crumbling but the people don't even notice because they are so happy in their dreams. Wow, said Sun. That's scary. How is there a place like this? How was it made? The Banyan did not know. Which was even more scary because trees know everything.

Then Sun started to notice weird things. The people around her were all disappearing. It started with one of the kids in her class. Her teacher said the kid moved, and everyone thought Okay. But then another kid in her class also moved. And everyone thought Okay again. But then one day Sun went to school and her best friend Avery told her he was moving. He said that his parents decided their family needed to move and Sun cried what was she going to do without her best friend ever? Avery said his parents told him it would be better to live someplace else and he would get used to it. But then when he moved it was like he disappeared. Sun never got a phone call or a letter or anything from him. He was gone. And Sun's mom talked about her friend moving and her dad talked about someone else moving, everyone moving. Sun wondered if they were really moving, or if they were all disappearing. And she wondered where Avery was. So she asked the butterflies because they know all about change and that's what was happening, everything was changing.

But the butterflies only knew that the people got on planes and left. They saw this and they smelled the wind that told them things were different but they did not know where the smell came from, maybe from far away maybe from the people maybe a lot of things said the butterflies. They did not know.

Then one day Sun's parents disappeared. They had been talking all quiet like telling secrets for a long time, and Sun and her brother (yes, she has a brother) wondered about it because grown ups think kids don't notice these things but they do. They heard and they knew that their parents were talking about them moving! Oh no! ~~This was bad.~~ No! No! No! This was bad! Then they told Sun and her brother what they already knew that they would be leaving and Sun asked if maybe they would move to where Avery was and they did not know about that

so Sun knew that meant no, so this was not good at all. But I have not told you about the disappearing part yet.

So Sun's parents got on a plane and left to go look at where they were going to live, just the two of them without Sun and her brother. They were supposed to be gone for a long weekend, but they didn't come back. Sun's aunt and uncle tried to call them, and then called the police and the police searched and searched but did not find them. So Sun went to the Banyan tree because if anyone would know where her parents were, it would be the trees that talk all the time and feel all sorts of things. The Banyan said Yes, I know where your parents are. When Sun talks to trees, she does not hear them in her ears, instead she feels the answers grow inside her, so that she has to ~~listen~~ pay attention very closely. ~~For her In humans~~ In her the electricity of tree talking feels like seeds sprouting quick inside your body, sprouting out and holding on and growing, and it happens inside places that feel the most, like in your heart or that little strong place in your stomach right behind your belly button. They are in the place where everyone is asleep, said the Banyan. How did they get there? asked Sun. The same way everyone else did said the Banyan. Can you help me? can I get them back? does anyone ever come back from that place where everyone is asleep? I can help you, said the Banyan. But no one has ever come back from that place. Get your brother, said the Banyan. You won't be able to do this alone.

So Sun ran and got her brother and came back. They watched as the Banyan tree opened up its wrapping trunk, all the thick parts opening and unwinding and creaking to make a long hole like a sideways mouth. ~~Few!~~ Phew! That's tough work for a tree. Come inside me, said the Banyan. Sun and her brother ~~Jon Henry Ocean~~ Rain held hands and climbed inside, and the Banyan closed. I will make you like my other friends, said the Banyan. That way, you can

travel far and when you get there, you won't go to sleep like everyone else. But the Banyan was scared for Sun and her brother Rain.

It was really dark inside the Banyan, and everything started to feel all wet and slippery, and then everything started to change. Like Sun and Rain felt themselves melting, ~~dis dizzol~~ ~~dizzolf~~ ~~It was really DIZZY in there!~~ dissolving all becoming something different. But it didn't hurt at all. Because Sun talked to butterflies, she tried to tell her brother Don't be scared. She thought they were changing and she was right! Sun and Rain were all there and also not there, and what was happening! EVERYTHING was all WET and MELTY and the ELECTRICITY and ~~MALL MOLECULES~~ THEIR molecules were traveling so fast and crazy that you can't even describe it and it made everything really hot! They couldn't even tell if they were still holding hands or not, that's how crazy everything was! And then! Then shake shake shake shake it all up! and stop. Just dark. Wow. Sun and Rain stayed still for a minute, trying to figure things out. But then they felt and heard ~~things around them~~ and smelled things around them. Moving and digging up ahead. So they followed the path.

And guess what? They saw a little light getting brighter and brighter. And then when they came out Swish and Whoosh into the Light and Air! they found out they were little wasps! YES! Little wasps! The Banyan turned them into little LITTLE FIG WASPS! Ka-bam like craziness! They had wings and antenna and lots of legs and big eyes that see so much light! Because did you know that banyan trees are fig trees, and fig trees need fig wasps and fig wasps need fig trees? They are some of the best friends ever! But now the little boy was really a girl because guess what? Fig wasps who fly are all girls. But he was okay with that because

being a girl is cool. His sister is a girl. And he has wings. Being a girl wasp is not the same as being a girl human. And he knew he would be a human boy again when they were done.

Sun and Rain looked around and saw that there were desks around them and that the fig on the tree they were on was not the Banyan, it was a tiny tree (but big to them because bugs) that was in a pot and was inside. The tiny fig tree told the girl, Hey, go now! You're wasting time! So instead of sitting around wondering what to do, the bugs buzzed off!

Their mission: find their parents and wake the zombies! (aka sleeping people) They knew they only had three days to complete their mission because the Banyan told them before they left. What were they going to do? How were they going to wake up all the people? How were they going to find their mom and dad?

They saw all the sleeping people at work so they knew they must be inside an office place. They looked for their parents as they flew. Then they saw a door that turned like a wheel to let people in and out. This was going to be tricky. They timed it just right and flew into the turning door when someone pushed it, and flew and flew until they were released outside. ~~Fe~~ Phew!

Then they stopped to rest in a bush. They decided to try to sting people to get them to wake up. So they flew to a park where kids were pretending to play, but were really sleeping. Then Sun saw someone she knew! She saw Avery! Avery was here in the place where everyone was asleep! Sun flew to his leg and sunk in her stinger, and then a huge hand came down to squash her! But she got away just in time. She and Rain watched Avery, but he looked the same. So then Rain flew over and and sunk his stinger into the Avery's leg, and a huge hand came down to squash him, and he had trouble getting his stinger out because he sunk it in really

deep to make sure he stung. So then Sun flew up to the Avery's face just in time and stung his cheek so that he swatted at his face instead and Rain had time to pull his stinger out and get away. They both watched Avery, but he looked the same. The stings did not wake him up.

So then Rain and Sun went to a tree to rest. What would they do? Then Sun remembered a story. Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears. We will be buzzing in people's ears. But we will tell them honest things to wake them up.

So this time Rain went first. He landed on the edge of Avery's ear and said You are asleep. You have to wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Sun watched and Rain kept on talking. It took a long time. Sun would have given up, but Rain believed his sister was right. It seemed like something was happening. It was happening. All of a sudden, after an hour, Avery swatted his ear a little bit, and Rain escaped quickly, and Avery shook his head, and his eyes opened and he saw that he was not riding rides and eating ice cream in a dream, but that he was dirty and everything was dirty. Then Sun took a risk and flew so that Avery could see her. He was about to run away, but then she talked and told him she was Sun and about the Dream World. Then Rain asked him to help them and buzz in people's ears to wake everyone up. They only had three days.

So that is what they did. But they still did not find their parents. It was most dangerous to buzz in grown-up people's ears because they swatted and swatted and Sun and Rain had to be careful. It was a lot easier to wake the kids up, so they woke all the kids up first and then the kids helped them to wake up all the grown ups. Sometimes it took hours to wake the grown ups up. One grown up took an entire day, and the kid who was waking up that grown up had to yell

really loudly the whole time. Then other kids helped, and they all were yelling at the one grown up to wake up. But finally they did it.

When the kids were waking up their moms or dads it was easier because the moms and dads listened more to their kids.

But Sun and Rain were having a hard time finding their parents. While all the kids were waking up the grown ups, they looked and looked. But it was night time and they were tired so they went to sleep in a tree. The next day they looked and looked, and still did not find their parents. On the third day that was the last day, they asked the kids if they saw their parents, and one kid said Yes. She took them to a restaurant that looked really bad and was so full of kids and adults yelling at two people sitting at a table, trying to wake them up. The two people were their mom and dad. They were really dirty, and even though they were in a restaurant, it did not look like they had eaten for a while. They just smiled sitting there. If anyone could wake them up, it was their children Sun and Rain.

So Sun went to their mom and Rain went to their dad, and they sat on their ears and started whispering. But as soon as they started, WHACK! The parents tried to smash them! They felt sad, and then buzzed back and tried again, and then WHACK! Again! Our parents don't recognize us said Rain. So they flew back to the tree in the office that they came out of, and asked it to change them to humans. The tree said it was risky because then they might come into the dream. And the tree was small and maybe couldn't do it. But Rain and Sun said Please, and so the tree said it would try. They flew into a fruit in the tree and then the fruit got bigger and bigger, and so big it touched the ground, as so big bigger than a watermelon, and then it popped! And out came Rain and Sun covered in fig and juice! Then they ran back to

their parents and told them to wake up, and hugged them and said they loved them, and then they woke up. Then everyone was awake and they left the town and never went back. Sun and Rain and their parents and Avery and his family and all Sun's classmates and the people they knew went back to Hawaii, and everyone went back to their homes from all different places.

But what if someone else comes to that town, and sees yucky things but also sees the dreams, and falls asleep? You have to be careful. And try to listen. Listen to the trees, listen more than anything else. When Sun and Rain and their mom and dad got back to Hawaii, Sun and Rain hugged and thanked their friend the Banyan tree because it saved everyone.

Feels like butterflies

Dear Diary,

Once upon a time there was a boy named Avery who everyone loved except the one sad bully in class who we won't name, but who seriously needs friends who will tell him when he's mean. But back to the story.

So today Avery and me were eating lunch and then the BBB (Big Bad Bully) said he had oreos but only people who begged could have. I was NOT going to beg for oreos either you want to share or you don't. And I looked at Avery to make sure he was thinking the same thing and he was just eating his chili con carne like he never heard. So BBB takes out this bag of oreos from his lunch and starts eating the oreos saying again how he will give to the people who beg. Me and Avery keep eating like we never heard, and I think maybe he will be squashed by our silence! Bwahahahaha! That would have been ~~speek~~ ~~spect-tack~~ supercalafragalistic! But then Jake says I like. NO JAKE! What did you say? says BBB. Please, I like says Jake again. SHUT UP JAKE! What? says BBB. Say it louder. What do you want? I like one oreo, please says Jake, please. And you know what? This whole time BBB kept on eating oreos, just eating and eating and then he had two oreos left, only two out of like almost a whole pack, that B52 Bumboocha, and then he eats one and says Say um again, and Jake says it, and then he takes that last oreo in half and gives Jake the half with no frosting. I cannot stand B52 Bumboocha BBB.

So then Avery was like, Never mind, Jake, he's going get plenny pimples anyway from all that frosting. You didn't know that, he says to BBB, that too much frosting makes too many zits? You just wait and see. BBB didn't say anything, just sat there with his mouth open. Avery

said Better if you shared, but sometimes you gotta learn the hard way. I love Avery. BBB didn't say anything back ~~except~~ except Nu-uh. You're lying. Avery just shrugged his shoulders. So tomorrow I bet BBB takes the frosting off all his oreos.

Sincerely of course,

Veronica

Dear Sweet Diary,

You are not as sweet as oreo frosting. BBB is tasting our revenge by not tasting the frosting! And Jake is enjoying revenge by eating all the frosting. It was kinda gross. BBB peeled off the frosting on every oreo and rolled each frosting piece in his hands and made a frosting play dough ball. Yuck. And I could see Jake thinking he wanted the frosting and that is just soooooo ~~yuck gross abhorrent abominable appalling awful displeasurable~~ distasteful. I tried to tell Jake not to touch BBB's leftovers but Jake doesn't care. And then BBB was like You want um? You want um? Too bad so sad. And I knew Avery was going to say something BUT then Jake was like I'll give you my milk. Two milks are better than nothing. To dip the rest of your cookies in. They're all dry without frosting. Jake! Okay so it's gross but wow. And BBB said Jake will get zits and Jake said he doesn't care, one more thing to tease him about. I sometimes can't tell about Jake.

BUT sweet, sweet revenge tastes like white frosting and doesn't at the same time! I wonder how long BBB will not eat frosting. His whole life I hope.

Over and out,

V

Dear Diary,

Have you ever wondered what caterpillars think about? When they're metamorphing in the ~~chrisis~~ chrysalis? They turn into goo. I wonder.

Yours,

V

Dear Diary,

Okay, so how unfair is it that just because I'm the oldest I have to be the most ~~patent~~ ~~pach~~ ~~PASHENT~~ ~~PASHIENT~~ *PATIENT* fair nicest one! NOT. Jonny wanted to watch Ninja Turtles and he had already decided what to watch before, like, yesterday when we were watching. BUT then Avery was all like, V, so what? You're the oldest. And not the oldest, I get to do what I want THE oldest, but like oldest I have to do what the little kids say. I felt so ~~embared~~ embarrassed that Avery said that.

V

Dear Diary,

After you pluck a flower, is it dead? It must have noticed. When I thought of this I wanted to tell Jonny and Malia to stop plucking all the little yellow flowers around our house. But I think I would be a bad older sister if I did. We pluck plumeria for lei, but that seems different from the flowers in the ground.

Yours,

V

Dear Diary,

So the lunch lady told BBB that the frosting is not going to make him have zits. THEN she told us to stop bullying him. She looked at us like we were bad and said how would you feel? WHAT? I know. But maybe she was a little bit right. I started to feel bad about feeling good that he was afraid of eating frosting. I guess maybe she was right. But BBB is still not the total victim like she was all Aw, Poor Boy with him. Poor boy not sharing cookies. Poor boy who teases Avery for being my best friend because I'm a girl and he's a boy. Poor Puka-Head. Sometimes I feel bad about the frosting and other times I think B52 can survive all his life without frosting, maybe even be better off not so bomboocha. Don't tell my mom I told you that.

Sincerely,

Veronica

Dearest Diary,

If you trim trees, do they like it? What about cutting a tree down? That is like killing it, but in The Giving Tree the tree still talked and told the little boy to take her trunk, but that was a book. I never liked that little boy. Did he ever think about the tree? No. He only thinks about himself.

Today mom and me read things scientists wrote about plants. They wrote that plants ~~make~~ release smells in chemicals when they are in trouble to ask for help and warn other

plants. But the scientists don't know if that means that the plants can feel what is happening because they say that plants don't have brains. I wonder if the flowers were all stinking up the yard when GIANT JON was picking them, doing their flower screaming only flowers can hear when Fee Fie FO FUM baby MALIA feet! were stomping through! Run and hide! Oh, wait, we can't! Stink it up! Stink it up!

But if a plant does not have any kind of brain at all, then what is making it stay alive? Even a brain not like a human brain, but different. I asked mom this, but she did not tell me what she thinks. The scientists talked about a Network in the plants, like in tree roots and leaves. I think our brains are Networks like that, that We Both Have Networks. Mom told me I still have to eat my vegetables! She was so playing, broccoli is my favorite food. That's weird, right? Another place we looked up said that plants feel, but they don't care. Mom said they're not right about that. I asked her why and she looked kinda funny, but then just said Think about it. I don't know. I eat chicken and I know chickens are alive and have feelings I'm sure they do. How can we know for sure that plants don't care? I am an animal too, part of the whole earth, so I guess it is okay that I eat things. I better be careful stuff does not eat me! Could you imagine a venus fly trap big enough for a human? THAT would be a good story!

Catch ya later,

V

Dear Diary,

Avery is leaving. His family is moving to California.

Sincerely,

Veronica

My Dear Diary,

I don't think I told you about my teacher Ms. Williams yet, and this is weird because I really like her. ~~I'm sorry~~ I apologize that I did not introduce you two yet.

I told you about how in our class we chose a person in history who is special to us and researched that person, and then wrote secret letters in Proper Letter Format to each other pretending to be our history person, and had mailboxes with our history person's name on them, and also gave each other treats. That was a LOT of fun! Of course I wanted to be Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Queen Liliuokalani but someone else got BOTH of them first, BUT if I had gotten them then I would never have found out about Marie Tall Chief! Or Maria Tallchief but I like calling her by her first real name. Another awesome person! My mom says maybe she'll let me do ballet lessons, we'll see, what about hula? But I can do hula and ballet! Look at Marie! But I told you all about that. I found out my partner was not Avery but that was okay, I still had a great partner who was Katsumi who put stickers in my box and once gave me a cheese and cracker snack pack. We also just went on a fieldtrip yesterday to watch a play, but now I remember that I am not introducing you and Ms. Williams.

Dear Diary, meet Ms. Williams. She is my teacher this year. She does have a first name, like all grown ups. Her name is Ms. Susanna Williams but it's weird to write her first name so you can remember it but I'm going to call her Ms. Williams. It's like when we saw Mr. Fujioka at the store. I know he eats! My dad was all like, Well teachers have to eat, V, I and I was like I know but it's still weird. So yeah, she has a first name and it's still weird.

So anyways, that is Ms. Williams. She has dark big eyes and really curly hair that she sometimes wears out and sometimes wears up, I like it best both ways when it's out it's like Bam! all like Merida only not red and shorter, and when she puts it up it looks like some kind of lady who wears pearls and stuff like ladies who lived a long time ago, with all curly Qs around her face. And she calls the really little kids like the ~~keind kindur kind~~ kindergardeners Kittens. Kind kittens! Kitten Kind! and says to our class You are the oldest you are role models for the little kids and help them. And she reads us stories every day. And she always wears a watch that has a sun and moon on it and whenever she is upset you can tell because her eyebrows come closer just a little and sometimes her mouth does too. Even though she tries to be calm that's the warning sign.

Love,

Veronica

Dear Diary,

I totally forgot why I introduced you to Ms. Williams today. It was because Avery is moving away.

Avery. And at first I thought maybe I was in trouble when Ms. Williams told me to stay when everyone else went to recess, I thought I did something wrong and I tried to figure out what I did. But then she came and sat next to me in Brianna's seat, and I thought that was wierd but if I was in trouble then why would Ms. Williams sit at Brianna's desk? Then she told me she knows how me and Avery are friends and how she knows that my best friend Avery is moving away. What do you do when your friend is leaving? She told me I write a lot, and what if I

write and email, did I think of doing that? Yeah, but it's not the same. I'm sorry Diary, but writing is not the same as being with your friend every day.

But then Ms. Williams said that I am losing being able to see my friend every day. She knows.

But I will write to Avery all the time. But it's not the same.

Everything changes all the time is what she told me. Like the butterflies I said, and she said Tell me more. That's what Ms. Williams always says, she always says Tell me more. ~~Sometimes its kinda~~ sometimes I don't like it when she says this but other times I do. Butterflies have to make so many changes and are so beautiful when they are munching munching fat caterpillars, I like the fat soft bright green ones best, and then when they metamorph into flying butterflies they are so beautiful and I think that's really scary changing like that especially when you know how their bodies turn into goo inside their ~~crysalis~~ ~~chrysalis~~ chrysalis. And if you look really close, you see how everything changes, like trees grow leaves and how they even grow from seeds and how clouds always move and how we move so the shadows all change and everything cannot stop changing or else what might happen? That's scary to think what might happen if everything stood still like freeze tag. BUT why does Avery have to go, this is something that his parents can change back! Its NOT like butterflies and eggs and lava and clouds and frogs and all the stuff that needs to happen! He needs to stay with me here!

Yeah, I was so angry, and I kinda cried with Ms. Williams sitting right there looking at me. I hugged her. She smells a little like rice candy.

Ms. Williams said that change hurts, like Avery going away. I guess the caterpillars might hurt in their chrysalis. It does hurt my chest hurts. Ms. Williams told me that a lot of people living here have to move because it costs a lot and sometimes it is not like a choice. That is scary. I think about all the people who live places that they don't want to live and don't have food and how my mom says I won the lottery being born and then won it again because I was born here. That is really scary that sometimes you don't have a choice. But then it makes it like Avery's family is making a choice. But forced.

Ms. Williams told me to keep thinking about the butterflies.

Love Hurts,

Veronica

Dear Diary,

All I keep thinking is that I don't know what it will be like without Avery. I don't care that I'll have to eat lunch with just BBB and Jake there, because maybe Loren will talk to me. No. I don't care that Avery will not be in my class. I don't care that we won't see each other every weekend. I do care about all this, but it's not the biggest thing. It's because Not together sometimes is okay, but when the grown ups are like Maybe you will see each other in a couple years, you can call, you can email, you can video chat WHAT IS THAT? It's not the same thing as having him here, right here next to me. They don't understand. Who will be Avery? No one but Avery.

Avery doesn't talk about it so I don't talk about it. I know how he feels. Today he gave me a necklace he made and I will never take it off, not even when I take a shower (but yes at the

beach because I don't want to lose it). It has turquoise and green beads that are my favorite colors and red and orange beads that are his favorite colors. He said he and his dad went to the store and he bought the beads and the string himself, and made it. They are in a pattern turquoise-green-turquoise-red-orange-red-green-turquoise-green-orange-red-orange then repeat all around. It is beautiful. I'm going to make him something too.

Love,

V

Dear Diary,

So this afternoon it was just me and mom and Malia because dad took Jonny to the dentist, and we made butter mochi. It's Jonny's favorite and mom was like We better save the guys some while she was eating one piece and another, but of course we can't eat it all! But I wonder if mom could. You never know with moms. But I don't think she would want to. But the reason I'm telling you is because then she was telling me how she knew Avery leaving was really hard. I really didn't want to talk about it. Sometimes adults just don't get it. But mom was still talking about Avery, saying how his parents found a nice place to live, and how I could go visit in the summer, and then I was like, If you really care then why don't you help his parents stay? I said that. And she looked at me. I know I said it sassy. But she said What do you mean? like I never said it sassy at all. I don't know! And she said How do you want me to help his family stay? They could stay with us! Mom said Where would they sleep? I don't know. I said Can't you give them money to stay? But she said We don't have that much money. I started to cry and I was all hot. I hated it. That's why I didn't want to talk about it. And mom

hugged me and said I know, I know even though I was being all sassy and yelling. So I went to my room by myself, I said I need to go to my room. That's why I'm writing now. I guess I put myself in time out. Mom sometimes says she needs a time out.

Love,

V

Dear Diary,

Today Avery brought arare to have at lunch, and he shared with everyone, with me and Jake and Loren and Kimi and Ku'u lei and Jacob and even with the BBB. His real name is Max. He looked all surprised when Avery said You want some? And then he took some, but not a lot like you might think some bully would take, but the same as everyone else. And he said Thank you.

Wow.

Sincerely,

V

Dearest Diary,

Avery left.

I made him a turquoise and green dragon out of beads because dragons are his favorite. It took me a long time and mom helped me look up how to make it and I messed up a couple times, but it is pretty. It is small. He can put it on a keychain, but when I gave it to him he held it in his hand and then put it in his pocket.

I love Avery. Not like he's my boyfriend love. But I just love him. I know I do because my chest hurts and missing is love. That's what mom said.

V

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